

He undoubtedly understands the "western character" to be a white man.

Two other contributors, both of West Virginia, characterize Hardy as a white man. Mr. Peters²⁷⁾ "can not say" about Henry, but explains that Hardy was a "white man lived in Logan County this state. He killed a man by the name of Vance²⁸⁾ over on the Big Sandy River in a log camp." Dr. Cox obtained from a certain Mr. Walker a "current report" in southern West Virginia "concerning a John Hardy who was a tough, a soloon frequenter, an outlaw, and a sort of thug. He [Mr. Walker] thinks this John Hardy was a white man, and is sure that he was hanged later on for killing a man in McDowell County or across the line in Virginia."²⁹⁾

In a few of their songs, Henry and Hardy seem to have rather close white companions. A blue-eyed woman is the apparent cause of the outlaw's troubles in two versions of "John Hardy", one from North Carolina and one from Kentucky,³⁰⁾ and the steel-driver takes leave of his blue-eyed "baby" in a Virginia text of the John Henry song.³¹⁾ Although questions may be raised about this motif as showing a belief in the two ballad figures as white men, it falls in line with the testimonial data, and this angle to the Henry tradition cannot be ignored.

The race of Hardy has been determined by his identification as the Negro desperado hanged in 1894 in southern West Virginia, but his confusion in oral tradition with John Henry and a notorious white outlaw of that section must have an important bearing on the belief in Henry as a white man, and possibly as a criminal also. Hardy might well be the contact man. Mr. Walker reported a white John Hardy, a "sort of thug", hanged for murder in McDowell County or across the line in Virginia, and Mr. Barnett has always heard that either Henry or Hardy was a "ruff'an" from Kentucky. The identification of this man is important.

In 1925 Ben Hardin was featured in a newspaper of that locality. Mr. Morton, a small boy at the time of Hardin's execution, writes:

Ben Harden -- many of our older citizens will remember this distinguished criminal who was hanged at Tazewell Courthouse on June 28, 1867, for the murder of Sanderlin Burns, who also was a Kentuckian and horse drover. Harden proposed to Burns to swap saddles, in a back alley, and asked Burns how he would trade. Burns replied to him and said 'I will swap just as though you had none' ... Harden left the scene and went to some one and got a double-barrelled shotgun ... and shot Burns. Harden was indicted at the May term of the circuit court, 1867, and was

²⁷⁾ J. M. Peters, Huntington, W. Va.

²⁸⁾ This may be a confusion with Abner Vance, a Baptist preacher, who killed Lewis Horton in that region. See *Folk-Songs of the South*, p. 207.

²⁹⁾ *Journal*, XXXII, 510.

³⁰⁾ Appendix, p. 137. Campbell and Sharp. *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, p. 257.

³¹⁾ Appendix, p. 99.

tried ... The jury brought in a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree. After sentencing Harden to be hanged the Judge asked him if he had anything to say, and he responded, 'If this had been done years ago it would have been better for me and many others.'³²⁾

Two of these older citizens have made pertinent statements about the outlaw. John McCall, who "saw it all and remembers it as if it were yesterday", says his name was John Benjamin Harden. Samuel Spurgeon, who was also at the hanging, states that he "went by the name of Ben Hardin usually", and was "sometimes called John Hardin, too, and even John Hardy or Ben Hardy, but his real name was John Benjamin Harding." He remembers that Ben Hardin was a bad man, "with long black hair and a wicked look". Mr. McCall remembers that the murderer rode to "his hanging in a wagon seated on his coffin". They agree that the rope broke, and that he had to be hanged the second time. Their account of his spectacular taking-off suggests that one might expect him to gain high place in the popular repertoires of that locality.

This testimony has the support of the Clinch Valley News and other newspapers of the time.³³⁾ One correspondent became rather dramatic in his "Execution of a Hardened Wretch".³⁴⁾ If anything further was necessary to put Ben Hardin on the honor roll of his profession, it followed in his ten-thousand-word "Autobiography", with a caption notable for its omissions:

Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin Harden, executed at Tazewell C[ourt] H[ouse] on the 28th of June, 1867, for the murder of Dennison T. Burns, the 16th day of April, 1867. Startling Confessions! Boys, take warning! Fate of the spoiled child, the disobedient boy, the roguish lad, the stealthy house-robber, the dashing highwayman, the daring horse-thief, the twofaced friend, the unprincipled intriguer, the successful swindler, the heartless seducer of female innocence, and the cold-blooded assassin of seven defenceless and unsuspecting victims.³⁵⁾

Nothing is known of Ben Hardin, except the events connected with his execution.³⁶⁾ He claimed to be from Kentucky, and was hanged for killing a man, not in McDowell County, but across the line in Virginia. That he is the white man in the Henry tradition seems almost certain, although others, such as the white steel-driver from Tennessee and the "freckle face woman", cannot be entirely ignored, certainly not in their respective localities. Yet, in the nature of things, even an approximate measure of such influences cannot be made.

³²⁾ Bluefield Daily Dispatch, Bluefield, W. Va., Aug. 30, 1925.

³³⁾ Lynchburg Daily Virginian, Lynchburg, Va., April 27, 1867.

³⁴⁾ Ibid., July 4, 1867.

³⁵⁾ Clinch Valley News, Tazewell, Va. Copy of extra edition in 1867, and subsequent to the execution of Ben Hardin, now in my possession. Its files begin around 1900.

³⁶⁾ For the court records of Hardin's trial, see John Newton Harmon. *Annals of Tazewell County, II*. Fuller account of the outlaw may be found in my article: "Ben Hardin", *Philological Quarterly*, X, 27 ff.

The age of the Henry tradition, as noted in testimonial and documentary accounts, should prepare the way toward its place of origin. But, unfortunately, several of the reports are too indefinite on that score.

The following is an example:

I was reared in South Carolina, and there I often heard the colored men, while driving with heavy hammers, sing this much of the song in question, which seemed to be the chorus:

'This is the hammer that killed John Henry, but can't kill me;

This is the hammer that killed John Henry, but can't kill me.'

I heard one man relate to another that John Henry was a negro convict (possibly of the state of South Carolina) who at that time was hired out to a quarry company, that John was such a powerful man a bet was made on him and a race was staged with the steam drill. The drill beat him ten inches in a day, and that night John Henry died.³⁷⁾ Another of the sort comes from Mrs. Susan Bennett:³⁸⁾

Wish to say that there was a man of that day in making the big ben tunnell that whipped the steam drill down. I live in about 25 miles of the tunnell and it is as true as the song Pearl Bryant or Jessie James or George Alley and you may write to the Bureau of Information and get the History of John Henry and his captains name. We have 3 records of Johnie so I will close and listen at him drive that steel on down.

In this case, however, I was able to visit the contributor at her home a few months after receiving her report by letter, and found that she had known about John Henry from the time Big Bend Tunnel was built, between 1870 and 1872.

Elizabeth Frost Reed, of West Virginia University, reports the following lines heard sung, in 1909, by Lewis Lytle, a Negro on her father's farm at Flat Creek, Tennessee:

When the women of the West hear of John Henry's death,

They will cry their fool selves to death.

In 1900 or 1901, Mr. Bonham heard of John Henry from a grade foreman by the name of Surface, as truthful a man as he ever met, when they were double-tracking the Norfolk and Western Railroad. "According to Surface, John Henry died after he had won the famous contest wielding two 18-pound hammers, one in each hand."³⁹⁾

Several others first heard of the steel-driver about this date. Mrs. McKnight,⁴⁰⁾ of Kentucky, writes: "My husband was very much interested in 'John Henry' ... I don't know where he got the John Henry

³⁷⁾ J. T. Baker, clergyman, in *The Bradford News Journal*, East Bradford, Va., Jan. 10, 1929.

³⁸⁾ Landisburg, W. Va.

³⁹⁾ *The Bradford News Journal*, East Bradford, Va., Jan 10, 1928.

⁴⁰⁾ J. L. McKnight, Conway, Ky., sent a text of "John Henry" a few days before he was killed in a railroad accident, and Mrs. McKnight answered the second letter to her husband.

song, or how long he had known it. He knew this song when I first met him, more than 30 years ago." Burl McPeak,⁴¹⁾ another Kentuckian, says, "My father learnt it from a colored man on the C and O road about 1904." Mr. Murphy,⁴²⁾ of Virginia, fails to know "anything definite about John Henry, but about the year 1900 I first began to hear the song long before talking machine Records was known in this section." Mr. Barnett,⁴³⁾ of West Virginia, says, "It has been 31 years since I learned the song of John Henry." Mr. Boone,⁴⁴⁾ whose "life, up to 1925, was spent in the West Virginia hills over in the Greenbrier Valley", sends from Pennsylvania a text each of the Henry and Hardy ballads, and states: "I do not remember just the exact date I first heard the songs, but it was the colored men working on the construction of the Greenbrier Division of the C. and O. Ry. I first heard sing the songs. It seems to me it was about 1899 or 1900." Two versions of "John Hardy" in which lines of "John Henry" appear go back to this period.⁴⁵⁾ These reports indicate a wide circulation of the Henry tradition by 1900, and point to an earlier date of origin.

The same situation obtains for the tradition in the last quarter of the 19th century:

Joe Wilson, Norfolk, Va. In 1890 people around town here were singing the song about John Henry, a hammering man, hammering in the mountains four long years. I was working in an oyster house here for Fenerstein and Company, and I am 66 years old and still working for them people.

Tishie Fitzwater, Hosterman, W. Va. I have heard of him for 40 years. A old colored man told me that John Henry was a colored man, and he was a cousin to him. I have never heard any one say that John Henry was any relation to John Hardy, and I am sixty years old.

R. H. Pope, Clinton, N. C. Well I know of the song 41 years. I went to Georgia 1888, and that song was being sung by all the young men. I am now 60 years of age. In those days I knew all the words of that song but can't remember all of them now, but it was that he would die with the hammer in his hand before he would be beat driving steel ... He was a negro and a real man so I was told.

O. W. Evans, Editor of The New Castle Record, New Castle, Va. The writer is a man in the 50's, but as a boy and young man I can distinctly remember the song, the tune, and some of the verses, which as I remember were quite a number ... The negroes of forty years ago regarded him [John Henry] as a hero of their race.

W. C. Handy, New York City. As a composer of Negro music I seized on a melody that I used to hear when I was a little boy, at

⁴¹⁾ Fords Branch, Ky.

⁴²⁾ R. D. Murphy, N. P., Council, Va.

⁴³⁾ W. S. Barnett, Holstead, W. Va.

⁴⁴⁾ D. O. Boone, Knox, Pa.

⁴⁵⁾ Folk-Songs of the South, p. 178. The West Virginia Review (Aug. 1931), p. 308.

Muscle Shoals Canal in Alabama. I printed this under the title JOHN HENRY as I had heard it.⁴⁶⁾

Andy Anderson, Huntington, W. Va. About 45 years ago I was in Morgan County, Kentucky. There was a bunch of darkeys came from Miss. to assist in driving a tunnel at the head of Big Caney Creek for the O & K. R R Company. There is where I first heard this song, as they would sing it to keep time with their hammers.

Jesse Sparks, Ethel, W. Va. My father is 87, and he says it has been a song ever since he can remember. He says he has heard his grandpa sing it ... I am 37 years old myself, and I have been knowing it ever since I have been big enough to sing.

This testimony shows the Henry tradition widely diffused as early as the eighties, the latest date possible for its origin. The introduction of the steam drill into railroad construction in this country soon after the Civil War marks the date before which it could hardly have started. It must, then, belong to the period between these two dates.

Several of the reports connect the tradition with Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. George Johnston⁴⁷⁾ adds a fuller account:

John Henry was the best driver on the C. & O. He was the only man that could drive steel with two hammers, one in each hand. People came from miles to see him use the two 20 lb. hammers he had to drive with.

It seems that two different contracting companies were meeting in what is called Big Bend Tunnel. One had a steam drill while the other used man power to drill with. When they met everyone claimed that the steam drill was the greatest of all inventions, but John Henry made the remark he could sink more steel than the steam drill could. The contest was arranged and the money put up. John Henry was to get \$100.00 to beat the steam drill.

John Henry had his foreman to buy him 2 new 20 lb. hammers for the race. They were to drill 35 minutes. When the contest was over John Henry had drilled two holes 7 feet deep, which made him a total of 14 feet. The steam drill drilled one hole 9 feet which of course gave the prize to John.

When the race was over John Henry retired to his home and told his wife that he had a queer feeling in his head. She prepared his supper and immediately after eating he went to bed. The next morning when his wife awoke and told him it was time to get up she received no answer, and she immediately discovered that he had passed to the other world some time in the night. His body was examined by two Drs. from Baltimore and it was found his death was caused from a bursted blood vessel in his head.

⁴⁶⁾ Excerpt from a personal letter. Mr. Handy was born Nov. 16, 1873. Blues: An Anthology, p. 18.

⁴⁷⁾ Lindsie, W. Va.

The information I have given you came to me through my grandfather. He was present at Big Bend Tunnel when the contest was staged, at that time he was time keeper for the crew that John Henry was working with. I have often heard him say that his watch started and stopped the race. There was present all of the R. R. officials of the C. & O. The crowd that remained through the race at the mouth of the tunnel was estimated at 2500 a large crowd for pioneer days.

John Henry was born in Tenn. and at the time of his death he was 34 years old. He was a man weighing from 200 to 225 lbs. He was a full blooded negro, his father having come from Africa. He often said his strength was brought from Africa. He was not any relation of John Hardy as far as I know ...

Considerable verisimilitude hardly characterizes all these details. The presence of all the officials of the road, with a crowd of 2500, at the drilling-contest had better be accepted as fictional embroidery. But the purpose of this study is not to emphasize the tissue of falsehood in popular reports. Big Bend Tunnel was built by a single contractor, as will be shown later, but the "two different contracting companies" may well represent two crews of workmen. The steel-driver may have had "2 new 20 lb. hammers" and used only one at a time. Two doctors from Baltimore may have examined Henry's body, but that they came to the tunnel for that purpose seems impossible of belief. His John Henry suggests the frontier strong man, who does impossible things.

Pete Sanders, an old Negro, who claims to be from Franklin County, Virginia, has lived for many years in Fayetteville, West Virginia, where with tales old and new he often entertains youngsters about town. Long years ago he learned an Indian war whoop, and occasionally, early in the morning or late in the evening, gives it from a nearby mountaintop. He says of Henry's connection with Big Bend:

I didn't drive no steel in Big Bend Tunnel. Uncle Jeff and Eleck did though, and saw John Henry drive against the steam drill, and died in five minutes after he beat it down. They said John Henry told the shaker how to shake the steel to keep it from getting fastened in the rock so he couldn't turn it. He told him to give it two quick shakes and a twist to make the rock dust fly out of the hole.

I heard the song of John Henry driving steel against the steam drill when they were still working on the C and O. It was all amongst us when I was a boy. When we boys there in Franklin County worked on the extension of the railroad up in Pocahontas County, we carried the song with us there and carried it back home when we went. It was the leading railroad song, but they've tore it all to pieces and sp'iled it. I heard it the other day on the machine, but it ain't no ways like it used to be.

They said Big Bend Tunnel was a terrible-like place, and many men got killed there. Mules too. And they throwed the dead men and mules and all together there in that fill between the mountains. Uncle Jeff and me come in West Virginia together when I first come, and he showed me the big fill and said they tried to put Henry there first, but didn't do it

and put him somewhere else. The dumper at the fill was the man that knowed all about it. Uncle Jeff said one day a long slab of rock that hung down from the roof fell and killed seven men. He said he seen 'em killed, and they put 'em in the fills. The people in the tunnel didn't know where they went.

Mr. Sanders, obviously, would not be the first to object to the popular account of building the Chesapeake and Ohio:

Kill a mule, buy another,
Kill a nigger, hire another.

The "extension of the railroad up in Pocahontas County", West Virginia, where he and others carried "John Henry" as the leading railroad song, is the "Greenbrier Division of the C. and O. Ry.", where Mr. Boone first heard Negroes singing it around 1900.

Erskine Phillips, editor and publisher of *The Fayette Democrat*, at Fayetteville, West Virginia, is well acquainted with the southern part of the state from several years' experience as a surveyor. He says:

I had a very interesting conversation with an old negro here sometime ago. He, Ben Turner, and his brother, Sam, are natives of Old Virginia, and migrated to West Virginia, along with hundreds of other 'niggers', to work on the C. and O. Railway. They both worked in the Big Bend Tunnel. John Henry was a powerful man, large all over, but possessed of the 'most powerful arms and shoulders I ever saw. Why! man', he said, 'his arms was as big as a stovepipe. Never seen such arms on a man in my life.'

'Could he drive steel the way the song says he could?' I asked. 'Law-- I reckon he could. Make that steel ring just like a bell. But look here. John Hardy (he spoke of him both as Henry and Hardy) had a steel turner almost as big and strong as he was. Just the same as two men driving. That man could turn the steel and hit almost as hard as John Henry could. John Henry wouldn't let no one else turn steel for him.'

The John Henry song was not the one that was generally sung by the steel-drivers. If some one were hurt or killed in the tunnel, the foreman would yell, 'All right, boys, let's hear "John Henry"'. The song had the effect of sobering the workmen, taking their minds off the accident and restoring order.

Not a single detail of this report even slightly suggests that Ben Turner ever saw either John Henry or Big Bend Tunnel. The foreman would hardly call for the ballad record of Henry's death in the tunnel as a means of "sobering the workmen" when some one else got killed there, certainly not in a tunnel without an official casualty list. Moreover, the Negroes of the community are still afraid of Henry's ghost at the tunnel, et cetera. Mr. Phillips gives this as a characteristic confusion of Henry and Hardy, but explains that they are often regarded as two different men.

Miss Elsie Scott,⁴⁶ of that section, reports her father without mentioning Hardy: "Dad worked with John Henry four years at Big

⁴⁶) Beards Fork, W. Va.

Bend Tunnel. He was a Negro and left a son. Dad says he was the hero of the world. Dad knows a lot about old timers." The tunnel was built in two and a half years.

Sam Williams⁴⁹⁾ was not at Big Bend, but says that he heard of John Henry while the tunnel was under construction:

I was working at Hawk's Nest, that tunnel there on the C and O, when John Henry drove steel with the steam drill at Big Bend further down below there. People coming down the line told us about it. They said John Henry and Bill Dooland drove steel together. That's what they said. I never did see old John, but they said he was a big powerful man.

I am 84. I turned steel for the steel-drivers. When I worked at Hawk's Nest, I worked for Major Randolph.

Mike Smith,⁵⁰⁾ seventy-three years of age when he made his report in 1925, had a somewhat wider range of experiences on the road, and thinks there was such a man:

I worked in putting the C and O from White Sulphur Springs to the big cut below Kanawha Falls. I worked a while with the surveyors, but later drove steel in tunnels. I didn't see John Henry. I think there was such a man, and he drove steel. I heard about him when they were working on the Big Bend Tunnel. They talked about him driving steel there, and getting killed.

B. O. Jones,⁵¹⁾ a farmer of Albemarle County, Virginia, says that he worked the public roads in his neighborhood with "statute labor" during the seventies and eighties, and that at various times had in his gang Negroes who had worked on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Among them he mentions Tom Hill, Tom Carey, and Ned Johnson, and says that these Negroes were continually singing "John Henry". He remembers that Tom Hill often talked of knowing Henry at Big Bend, where he claimed the steel-driver died from sickness about the time the tunnel was completed. Mr. Jones says that he worked no statute labor after 1889.

Mr. Logan,⁵²⁾ a native of Wythe County, Virginia, says that he went to Big Bend Tunnel to work when he was "between 16 and 17 years old":

I drove steel for Blevins four months at the east end of Big Bend Tunnel before they got the shafts in. Blevins was a foreman there, and he went from Smyth County right by Wythe.

I remember seeing Mike Breen and Jeff Davis. I didn't see John Henry. I didn't hear anything said about a great steel-driver.

When I went back to Ivanhoe, people would come in there from the tunnel and talk about John Henry driving steel with a steam drill. They had a song on it, and it was a whole lot longer than the John Henry song they sing now.

⁴⁹⁾ Bluefield, W. Va.

⁵⁰⁾ Hinton, W. Va.

⁵¹⁾ Ivy, Va.

⁵²⁾ J. M. Logan, Pownell, W. Va.

I heard the song often before Big Bend Tunnel was finished. Mike Breen and Jeff Davis were very conspicuous among the workmen at Big Bend Tunnel. A full account of its construction should mention them on the first page. They taught the Negroes there how to do four days' work in one day.

W. M. Coleman,⁵³⁾ who was retired by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in 1926 and put on the pension list, says that he was born in Bedford County, Virginia, and soon after the "C and O was completed started to work a track force on a section of the James River", and has worked at different places all along the line in Virginia and West Virginia:

Dick Deans, and Aaron Bailey, and Anthony Jones worked on my first crew, and off and on for a long time afterwards. They were big strapping Negroes from Campbell County, Va. They were always singing when they worked, and 'John Henry' was their best song, they liked it the best.

They worked in Big Bend Tunnel, and all of them said they'd seen John Henry drive. Dick Deans said he saw John Henry drive against the steam drill, but I don't recall anything he said about his death. They said John Henry was the most powerful man they'd ever seen, rawbony, and as black as he could be.

These Negroes are all three dead. Dick Deans was working for me at the time when he got killed on the railroad track.

A large number of these reports connect the Henry tradition with the Chesapeake and Ohio, and all but two of them place the steel-driver in the construction of Big Bend Tunnel, built between 1870 and 1872. Some of these witnesses have been employed at one time or another on the road, but all of them testify to hearing elsewhere of John Henry, not at the tunnel. The four following reports were made by men who have long service records with the railroad, two of them being employees of the company now and one on the pension list, and who testify to hearing the tradition in the immediate Big Bend community.

Cal Evans,⁵⁴⁾ who cooked for railroad people around the tunnel off and on for forty or fifty years, and who had an opportunity, therefore, to learn its early history, states that he heard the reports of Henry's connections there when he first moved into the neighborhood, and has heard them ever since.

E. S. Scott⁵⁵⁾ states that he works for the "C and O people, and started with them in 1879". He says:

I helped to clear out a wreck in Big Bend Tunnel in 1881. I heard the people there at the work then sing John Henry that beat the steam drill down, and I've heard it ever since then on the road, but I don't sing it and never did.

⁵³⁾ Mt. Carbon, W. Va.
⁵⁴⁾ Talcott, W. Va. See p. 13 ff.
⁵⁵⁾ Montgomery, W. Va.

I remember how they talked about John Henry being such a great steel-driver, and I won't more'n about twenty years old then.

Big Bend was first arched with timber, and John Hedrick states, in the next chapter, that he had charge of that work. Falls in the tunnel caused several wrecks the first few years after its construction, and resulted in the timber being replaced by a brick arch, beginning in the early eighties. Cal Evans, already mentioned, cooked for the workmen on this job. Tom Wood⁶⁶⁾ says that he has lived at Big Bend fifty years, worked thirteen years helping to arch the tunnel with brick, and is now on the pension list of the road. He adds, "When we were arching the tunnel along in the eighties, holes in the heading were pointed to as those John Henry drilled. People here in the neighborhood still talk about hearing John Henry driving steel in the tunnel. Any noise in the tunnel, like dropping water, is liable even now to scare some of them."

J. E. Huston is a telegraph operator for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, and is stationed at Big Bend where he has worked for the company since 1893. He was living there when the brick arch was begun, and remembers that the workmen often spoke of the holes in the heading as being drilled by John Henry:

When I was a boy, we boys here in the neighborhood used to play steel-driving. We used sticks for hammers and sang as we played, 'This old hammer killed John Henry', and so on.

The John Henry story has been in our family ever since we moved to Big Bend Tunnel in 1881. My father worked for the C and O Railroad, and they moved him to Talcott in 1881. After we moved here I heard him talk with the people around the tunnel time and again about the contest John Henry had with the steam drill.

My mother had two old Negro house servants, a man and his wife, who quite often spoke of the steel-driver. They were certain that he was buried in the big fill at the east end of the tunnel.

Obviously the old Negroes are the best chroniclers of the Henry tradition. Like the exempla of the faithful, their tales are first-hand and have the force of reality. That of William Lawson⁶⁷⁾ is characterized by marvels that hardly need excite distrust. He reports his age as eighty-five and the place of his birth as Loudin County, Virginia, where his mother, 106 years old, still lives. During the Civil War he was on both sides, first with the Confederacy and then with the Union, but regards himself first of all as a farmer:

I was living on A. S. Massey's place up Falling Spring Valley when I went to Big Bend Tunnel in the spring. My brother Armstead was already there. I went to him there and stayed 'til time to cut corn in the fall. It was the year they put the hole through.

Armstead was along with John Christian and John Turner in the heading, and I drove steel under Armstead. He showed me where to drive. We were driving from the east end.

⁶⁶⁾ Talcott, W. Va.

⁶⁷⁾ Charleston, W. Va.

When we met a dispute arose between the two sides about who was the first man to drive a light hole through. My brother said he did, and they fussed about it all that evening. Next morning when we started working again they started the dispute again. My brother and Will Christian (Will was from the other side) shot each other dead. Armstead said, 'Your gun ain't no bigger than mine', and they both fired about the same time. Will Christian hit my brother right plumb in the heart, and my brother hit him a little on the side further toward the middle of his breast. Both of them were dead in five minutes after the guns cracked.

I was the first to get to Armstead, and turned him over. He fell on his face. Then C. R. Mason come. They buried him on the mountainside in a government graveyard.

When the hole was put through there was a great deal of whiskey in the tunnel, and that's what started all the fuss. They fussed over who put the crowbar through first, but it was the drill.

The hole had been put through three or four months when John Henry was killed. He was the best steel-driver I ever saw. He was short and brown-skinned, and had a wife that was a bright colored woman. He was 35 or 36, and weighed 150 pounds.

When I went there they had a steam drill in the tunnel at the east end. They piped the steam in. They had a little coffee-pot engine on the outside. They didn't use it in the heading, but on the bench and on the sides.

John Henry drove steel with the steam drill one day, and beat it down, but got too hot and died. He fell out right at the mouth of the tunnel. They put a bucket of cold water on him.

His wife come to the tunnel that day, and they said she carried his body away, I don't know. I never saw anybody buried at the tunnel except my brother. They said they shipped some of them away, but I didn't see anybody shipped away. I don't know where they buried Will Christian. They didn't bury him with Armstead.

The time John Henry killed his self was his own fault, 'cause he bet the man with the steam drill he could beat him down. John Henry never let no man beat him down, but the steam drill won't no good nohow.

John Henry was always singing or mumbling something when he was whipping steel. He would sing over and over the same thing sometimes. He'd sing

'My old hammer ringing in the mountains,
Nothing but my hammer falling down.'

A colored boy 'round there added on and made up the John Henry song after he got killed, and all the muckers sung it.

C. R. Mason was the boss man at the tunnel. He was a good-hearted old man, but he was a tough man. He'd spit on you all the time he was talking to you. His son was named Clay Mason.

The historical residuum of this first-hand report is certainly not very considerable. C. R. Mason built Lewis Tunnel⁵⁸) not Big Bend. The two are on the same road, fifty or sixty miles apart, and were

⁵⁸) Tunnelling, p. 962 ff.

JOHN HENRY ON THE CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO RAILWAY

A factual basis for the Henry tradition on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia required the employment of hand labor and machinery together, if not continuously at least on occasion, in its construction from 1870 to 1873. If rock-drilling on the road was done altogether by hand drills or altogether by steam drills, no chance for a conflict between the two kinds of work obtained, and the tradition can have no real basis there. That the opportunity, and the for such a conflict did actually exist has more than legendary support.

In the second half of the 19th century hand labor was employed widely in tunnelling, and in some cases the hand drill was used exclusively.¹⁾ Steam drills came into fairly general use in the third quarter of the century, particularly in heavy tunnelling, both in Europe and America. On the Mt. Cenis Tunnel they were put "to work in full during 1861", and remained to the completion of the tunnel ten years later.²⁾ Their next successful use was in the Hoosac Tunnel, where the Burleigh drills were introduced in 1866.³⁾ In 1870 they were introduced into the Nesquehoning Tunnel, with marked success.⁴⁾ From 1872 to 1875 the Ingersoll drills were employed with the Burleigh compressors successfully in building the Musconetcong Tunnel.⁵⁾

About this date hand drills and steam drills were brought together on several lines. Notable among these was the Cincinnati Southern, with twenty-six important tunnels. In some of them hand drills were used in the heading, and in others on the bench, supplemented by steam drills.⁶⁾ In actual practice, of course, the two types of drilling were employed together wherever the steam drill was tried out in tunnelling during its period of development, a half-century or more.

Their use together on the Chesapeake and Ohio, at some time between 1870 and 1873, is shown by the testimony of L. W. Hill, a soldier of the Confederacy, who is better known as "Dad" among railroad people around Hinton, West Virginia, where he was living when he made his report in September, 1925:

¹⁾ Port Henry Tunnel on the New York and Canada, 1874-76, and Lick Log Tunnel on the Western North Carolina Railway, 1870, were built by hand labor. Tunnelling, pp. 976, 982. In Mount Wood and Top Mill tunnels, built in 1889, "all drilling was done by hand". Journal of the Western Society of Engineers, II (1897), 49.

²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 130.

³⁾ Ibid., p. 165 ff.

⁴⁾ Ibid., pp. 165, 974.

⁵⁾ Henry S. Drinker, resident engineer of the Musconetcong Tunnel. The Railroad Gazette, VII (June 5, 1875), 228 ff.

⁶⁾ Tunnelling, p. 966 ff.

I was conductor 35 years on a freight train on the C and O Railroad between Hinton and Clifton Forge. I am now retired and on the pension list of the C and O.

I got one of my eyes hurt by a piece of rock flying in it when I was helping to build Lewis Tunnel, which is not far from Big Bend Tunnel, just above here on the C and O Railroad. I have been troubled with my eyes ever since, but I lost the sight of my best eye first, and now I can hardly see.

A steam drill was used for a while in building Lewis Tunnel, and I ran the stationary engine that furnished steam for it. The drill could be used on a bench only, and was not a success there, and it gave way to the hand drills. Later I ran the stationary engine for lifting rocks in the shaft and pumping water.

In one way or another many people were killed in building Lewis Tunnel: many were killed from careless blasting. There was a graveyard built there along with the tunnel, and one in Big Bend Tunnel too.

Bob Jones was the best steel-driver in Lewis Tunnel, but not much better than some of the others in there with him. They usually sang a song they had composed on their work, or the foremen, or some 'loose' women around the camps. They called one of them Liza Dooley, and made a song on her.

This report of the hand drill as the important tool at Lewis Tunnel puts the type of drilling there in line with that employed generally on the road. A newspaper of the state gives "from Big Sandy to White Sulphur, a distance of at least 200 miles, the clink of the drill-hammer ... heard from early in the morn to eve."⁷⁾ The published official records of the road make no exception to the general use of hand labor in that work.⁸⁾

Mr. Hill's connection with machine-drilling on the road is highly significant. With the steam drill established in tunnelling by 1870, and the general airing of its marvels in engineering journals and local newspapers,⁹⁾ those responsible for the extension of the Chesapeake and Ohio across West Virginia could not escape giving it a trial. The belief of Shanley, the contractor of Hoosac Tunnel, that the expense of hand labor there would have been "fully three times the cost of machine-drilling",¹⁰⁾ and Hoosac Tunnel was well on toward completion by 1870, could not be ignored by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway whose bonds were being sold on Wall Street.¹¹⁾ Their report indicates full use of all up-to-date methods:

Beyond the great want of trained mechanical labor at that time in the Southern States, the tunnel experience upon the work of the several lines consolidated into the Chesapeake and Ohio cannot be said to have departed

⁷⁾ Wheeling Intelligencer, Wheeling, W. Va., Oct. 3, 1871.
⁸⁾ Tunnelling.
⁹⁾ Wheeling Intelligencer, Dec. 30, 1870. Lynchburg Daily Virginian, Sept. 22, 1871.
¹⁰⁾ Tunnelling, p. 244.
¹¹⁾ The Weekly Register, Point Pleasant, W. Va., March 3, 1870.

materially from the routine of construction of other first-class mountain roads of the same period.¹²⁾

Everything favored the introduction of steam drills on the road between 1870 and 1873. Through the development of the compressor system at Mt. Ceniz Tunnel, their successful use in tunnelling had been noted in Europe for nine years. They had been used with marked success for four years in the Hoosac Tunnel of Massachusetts, and had just been introduced with great promise into the Nesquehoning Tunnel. They were therefore a necessary part of the equipment for building first-class mountain roads of that period.

That steam drills were actually used at Lewis Tunnel, as reported by Mr. Hill, is shown by newspaper accounts during 1871. In January of that year, the *Richmond Dispatch* noted that "at the Lewis tunnel, or Jerry's run, the contractors have put the steam drills in operation".¹³⁾ In November following, Charles Nordhoff, formerly editor of the *New York Post*, who at the time was making a trip along the Chesapeake and Ohio across West Virginia and writing a series of letters on the progress of work on the road, referred to Lewis Tunnel "in which several of Burleigh's drills are at work".¹⁴⁾ These records cover a period of practically nine months.

Both types of tunnelling, then, were employed together on the road between 1870 and 1873, thus satisfying the major requirement of a factual basis for the Henry tradition in its construction. That innovations of this sort among hand labor would be followed by drilling-contests between the old and the new was the thing to expect. That such a contest, the basic episode of "John Henry", actually took place as celebrated in popular report has every reasonable influence from these circumstances in its favor, and should not require much further evidence for its authenticity.

If the steam drills put to work at Lewis Tunnel in January, 1871, were the Burleigh drills mentioned in November of that year, and were operated continuously for almost nine months, Mr. Hill would seem to be in error; but he has the support of the chief engineer of that work, that they failed: "Subsequent to War, Burleigh rock-drill tried in the tunnel, but unsuccessfully."¹⁵⁾ This statement not only establishes Mr. Hill, who had a part in testing the machine, but throws damaging light on the assumption that the steam drills mentioned in the *Richmond Dispatch* as having been put to work at the tunnel in January were the Burleigh drills referred to by Nordhoff in November following, and favors the inference that several steam drills were experimented with at Lewis Tunnel, those

¹²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 484.

¹³⁾ Jan. 21, 1871. The *Richmond Dispatch* is in conflict with the Chesapeake and Ohio "records that steam drills were first introduced in construction on Lewis Tunnel the latter part of April, 1871." John Henry, p. 49. Dr. Johnson states in his next paragraph that the C and O files of reports from their engineers and contractors of this period have been destroyed by fire.

¹⁴⁾ *New York Weekly Tribune*, Nov. 8, 1871.

¹⁵⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.

mentioned in January and November, and possibly in April, and very probably others before and after these dates.¹⁶⁾

It follows that the steam drill in all probability was tried out elsewhere on the road at the time, and Big Bend, the largest tunnel on the line, had certain advantages to offer. The rock of Big Bend was different from that of Lewis Tunnel,¹⁷⁾ and different results might have been expected from the machine, with the promise of a larger number of sales upon its adoption there.

So-called documentary proof for the steam drill at Big Bend Tunnel seems not to exist. The only possible reference of the sort known appears in an account of the work there about the time the tunnel was completed: "Unavoidable contingencies, such as foul air, breaking of machinery, &c., have delayed this part of the work considerably."¹⁸⁾ That breaking of machinery" can have such value is very doubtful. It would mean too great reliance on the steam drill to accord with known facts. In the absence of anything better for an understanding of the circumstances at Big Bend, testimonial data must be allowed.

Neal Miller,¹⁹⁾ son of Andrew Jackson Miller, a native of the community, lives about a mile up Hungart's Creek, which joins Greenbrier River at the east end of Big Bend Tunnel. He was a member of a large family. Three of his brothers "followed" the railroad. Two are on the Norfolk and Western, one an engineer and the other a painter. The third was an engineer on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, and a few years ago "his train almost smothered him to death in Big Bend Tunnel," with the result that he died about four months later. In his neighborhood Neal Miller is regarded as having a good memory and being honest.

Mr. Miller says that he worked in Big Bend "off and on", carrying water and steel for the workmen, and knew John Henry there.

I saw John Henry drive steel in Big Bend Tunnel. He was a great singer, and always singing some old song when he was driving steel. He was a black, rawboned man, 30 years old, 6 feet high, and weighed near 200 pounds. He and Phil Henderson, another big Negro, but not so high, were pals, and said that they were from North Carolina.

Phil Henderson turned the steel for John Henry when he drove in the contest with the steam drill at the east end of the tunnel. John Henry beat the steam drill because it got hung in the seam of the rock and lost time.

Dave Withrow, who lived with his wife at our home, was the foreman in charge of the work on the outside of the tunnel where John Henry

¹⁶⁾ Such was the experience at Hoosac Tunnel. The Brooks, Gates, and Burleigh machines were introduced there in June, 1866, and replaced by the Burleigh drill in November following. Tunnelling, p. 159 ff. About 40 of these machines were discarded at Hoosac. Did the manufacturers try to sell them in the South?

¹⁷⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.

¹⁸⁾ The Greenbrier Independent, June 1, 1872.

¹⁹⁾ C. S. ("Neal") Miller, Talcott, W. Va.

beat the steam drill, and Mike Breen was the foreman on the inside of the tunnel there.

The steam drill was brought to Big Bend Tunnel as an experiment, and failed because it stayed broke all the time, or hung up in the rock, and it could be used only on bench drill anyway. It was brought to the east end of the tunnel when work first commenced there, and was never carried in the tunnel. It was thrown aside, and the engine was taken from it and carried to shaft number one, where it took the place of a team of horses that pulled the bucket up in the shaft with a windlass.

John Henry used to go up Hungart's Creek to see a white woman, -- or almost white. Sometimes this woman would go down to the tunnel to get John Henry, and they went back together. She was called John Henry's woman 'round the camps.

John Henry didn't die from getting too hot in the contest with the steam drill, like you say. He drove in the heading a long time after that. But he was later killed in the tunnel, but I didn't see him killed. He couldn't go away from the tunnel without letting his friends know about it, and his woman stayed 'round long after he disappeared.

He was killed all right, and I know the time. The boys 'round the tunnel told me that he was killed from a blast of rock in the heading, and he was put in a box with another Negro and buried at night under the big fill at the east end of the tunnel. A mule that had gotkilled in the tunnel was put under the big fill about the same time.

The bosses at the tunnel were afraid the death of John Henry would cause trouble among the Negroes, and they often got rid of dead Negroes in some way like that. All the Negroes left the tunnel once and wouldn't go in it for several days. Some of them won't go in it now because they've got the notion they can still hear John Henry driving steel in there. He's a regular ghost 'round this place.

His marks in the side of the rock where he drove with the steam drill stayed there awhile at the east end of the tunnel, but when the railroad bed was widened for double-tracking they destroyed them.²⁰⁾

The Hedrick brothers, George, seventeen, and John, twenty-three, were living with their father within a few hundred yards of Big Bend when work began on the tunnel in 1870, and remained there while it was under construction. George still lives there, but for the last few years John has lived with his daughter's family in Hinton, eight miles west of the tunnel.²¹⁾

George Hedrick says that he did no work in the tunnel, but that he was continually around where the men were at work, and knew "what was going on":

My brother John helped to survey the tunnel and had charge of the woodwork in building it. I often saw John Henry drive steel out there. I saw the steam drill too, when they brought it to east end of the tunnel,

²⁰⁾ Mr. Miller made his report in Sept., 1925.

²¹⁾ The testimony of George Hedrick, Talcott, W. Va., was obtained in Sept., 1925, and that of John Hedrick, Aug., 1927. The latter was visiting his son in Kentucky when I made my first trip to the tunnel in 1925.

but I didn't see John Henry when he drove in the contest with it. I heard about it right after. My brother saw it.

My memory is Phil Henderson and John Henry drove together against the steam drill. That was the usual way of driving steel in the tunnel.

I saw John Henry drive steel. He was black and 6 feet high, 35 years old, and weighed 200 or a little more. He could sing as well as he could drive steel, and was always singing when he was in the tunnel. - 'Can't you drive her, - - huh?'

The Hedrick brothers are sober men of good practical sense and judgement. George is about six feet tall, stands erect, and weighs around two hundred pounds, and must have been a superior man forty years ago. John is not quite so tall, but has a larger frame and muscle. He was twenty-three when the tunnel was begun, and was unquestionably well fitted for a responsible job among the gangs there. He speaks with the authority of a tunnel boss:

I was manager of the wood-work in putting through Big Bend Tunnel, and built the shanties for the Negroes there in the camp. The first work at Big Bend Tunnel was making the survey, and I helped with that. Then men came to put down the shafts, and took rock from them 50 feet down to send away for contractors to examine when they were making contracts for the work on the tunnel. Menifee put down the first shaft. When he came I went with him to help him find the place. I worked there till the tunnel was all completed.

I knew John Henry. He was a yaller-complected, stout, healthy fellow from down in Virginia. He was about 30 years old, and weighed 160 or 170 pounds. He was 5 feet 8 inches tall, not over that.

He drove steel with a steam drill at the east end, on the inside of the tunnel not far from the end. He was working under Foreman Steele, and he beat the steam drill too. The steam drill got hung up, but John Henry was beating him all the time. I didn't see the contest, because it was on the inside of the tunnel, and not very many could get in there. I was taking up timber, and heard him singing and driving, and he was beating him too.

John Henry stayed 'round the tunnel a year or two, then went away somewhere. I don't remember when he left. He had a big black fellow with him that drove steel, but he couldn't drive like John Henry.

John Henry was there 12 months after the contest. I know. He was there when the hole was opened between shaft 1 and 2. Henry Fox put the first hole through, and then climbed through it. He was a foreman, and got the watch that Johnson offered for the first man to get through. He was from shaft 2, and people on the other side pulled him through and tore off all his clothes.

I don't believe a single man got killed at Big Bend Tunnel at work. A boy fell in the shaft, and one died from foul air. A man was killed in Little Bend Tunnel,²² but none in Big Bend.

These three witnesses are giving direct testimony, not popular or hearsay reports. They are not ballad-singers and general reposit-

²²) A tunnel on the line a short distance west of Big Bend Tunnel.

tories of oral traditions, but represent the stable citizenry of a conservative community. In a court or forum of that locality, they would have the support of good character and general reliability in matters of dispute coming under their observation.

The explanation Mr. Miller makes of the steam drill at Big Bend and the subsequent use of the engine from it recalls Mr. Hill's experiences with the machine at Lewis Tunnel. His account of John Henry's death and burial is of a hearsay character, and has only the value of a report at the time. He is not alone in making this report, however, and his account of the tragic tone of the place will seem more real eventually. Mr. Miller is no apologist, and no hero-worshipper, for John Henry or anybody else, as his testimony indicates. He has the characteristic mountaineer attitude toward the Negro, and regards the famous steel-driver as rather vicious, "just another Negro", superior of course and able to claim his woman when he was present, but remembers that he was not always present. His reference to Henry's woman as "almost white" was but a cautionary after-thought to temper the blow "white woman" for the moment, and has no other value in his report. Later he talked more fully about the woman, whom he knew for several years. She lived in a little house about two miles up Hungart's Creek, and often made long trips visiting construction camps, usually of miners, along the railroad. Confirmation of this account may be had from G. L. Scott, previously mentioned, who remembers her house, her name and fame, and the man who "stood her" at Big Bend Tunnel.²³)

In his statement that John Henry sang "Can't you drive her, -- huh?" George Hedrick makes a good claim for his acquaintance with the steel-drivers at the tunnel, and for the correctness of his memory. A few months after Big Bend was completed, the line

²³) O. F. Morton says of Negro slaves in Monroe County, which included the Big Bend community at the time the tunnel was begun: "The servants in the 'bighouse' looked down on the field hands, but both house and field servants looked down on the poor class of whites." *A History of Monroe County*, p. 185 ff.

In 1878, Page Edwards, a Negro living at Big Bend Tunnel, became jealous of his wife, a "bright mulatto woman of handsome appearance," and killed her. In 1907, Elbert Medlin, born in the larger Big Bend community about the time the tunnel was under construction, killed his wife because she seemed to prefer the other man. Medlin's father was a light mulatto, and his mother a "white woman of low and degraded instincts." They claimed that they were married in Ohio. J. H. Miller, *History of Summers County*, pp. 788, 807.

Anne Royall, a native of Monroe County, gives an example of a family of white girls over in Virginia having children by Negro men, and adds from her "poor ignorant driver" of the coach, "There were several instances of their having children by black men." *Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the United States (1826)*, by a Traveller, p. 30 ff.

For the race problem in Virginia, see J. H. Russell, "The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619-1865," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, XXXI.

"Can't you drive her home, my boy?" was published as having been sung by the miners in building the tunnel.²⁴⁾

John Hedrick makes even a better claim for his memory of the tunnel. He is correct in saying that "Menifee put down the first shaft," and in Menifee's purpose in doing it.²⁵⁾ Building shanties for the workmen, surveying, and sinking shafts for rock to be used in contracting for its construction characterize the first work at the tunnel, facts that will not be questioned. Fox²⁶⁾ and Steele²⁷⁾ were foremen at the tunnel, and the former was in charge when the opening was made from shaft one to shaft two, as Mr. Hedrick states.

Testimony of this sort is not altogether hearsay stuff, and can hardly be denied value in showing the employment together of the two kinds of labor at Big Bend. These men are certain that they saw the two types of drills at the tunnel, and that a contest took place between them. Their evidence is of about equal value.

In their statements for Henry's presence, they are supported by two other witnesses, George Jenkins and D. R. Gilpin, who claim that they worked in the tunnel. These two men were not there when the tunnel was begun, but came later and saw less.

Mr. Jenkins²⁸⁾ says that he is a native of Buckingham County, Virginia, that he went with his father, a blacksmith, to Big Bend soon after the tunnel was started, that he worked at first as "tool-boy", and that later his father got him a job in the shop to "sharpen steel and other tools":

John Henry was there when I went to Big Bend, and I remember he was under Jack Pasco from Ireland. He was very black, and he'd weigh about 160. Always singing when he worked. He was a sort of song-leader. He was 30 or 35 years old.

I don't know what he did when he wasn't at work in the tunnel. I don't know when he left the tunnel or where he went. No; I don't know anything about him driving steel against a steam drill. The tunnel was all hand work.

Jim Brightwell ran the hoisting engine at shaft 2, and my brother fired for him. Captain Johnson gave a barrel of liquor when they knocked through the heading from shaft 2 to 3. Mose Selby stabbed John Hunt that day, but didn't kill him. I saw Hunt in Roanoke a few years ago.

I saw one man killed in the tunnel. He was taking up bottom when a rock fell from overhead and killed him dead. I don't remember what they did with him, sent him home to his people I suppose.

²⁴⁾ The Mountain Herald, Hinton, W. Va., Jan. 1, 1874.

²⁵⁾ The Greenbrier Independent, Jan. 22, 1870.

²⁶⁾ The Railroad Gazette, Nov. 2, 1872.

²⁷⁾ John Henry, p. 30. Dr. Johnson quotes from Border Watchman. I have not been able to find the files of this newspaper, but other newspapers of the time often quoted from it.

²⁸⁾ Testimony of George Jenkins, 75 years old, of Montgomery, W. Va., was obtained in Aug., 1927.

When the mules came out of the tunnel some of them were blind as a bat. One went blind and stayed blind. Most of them got all right after a day or so. They put a cover over their heads for a while.

They burnt lard oil and blackstrap in the tunnel for lights.

After Big Bend was in I flagged on the work train between White Sulphur and Hinton about a year. Then I went with my father to work on a tunnel at King's Mountain, Ky. No; I knew John Henry only at Big Bend. I don't know what became of him.

Mr. Gilpin²⁹⁾ is on the pension list of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. He came to Big Bend, he says, from Knoxville, Tenn., with his father, a well-digger who had been successful in several states of the South before the Civil War in sinking wells through rock under water. His father was brought to the tunnel by Johnson, contractor, whose efforts to put down shaft one had been checked by water rising in it, and remained as a sort of boss or director of drilling and blasting in the heading.³⁰⁾ Mr. Gilpin says that he worked along with his father, carrying water and steel for the workmen.

He remembers John Henry, and describes him as black, about six feet tall, and weight "as much as 200 pounds, but not fat", with "thick lips and the prettiest set of white teeth I ever looked at". He adds that Henry, like the others, usually kept his shirt off when he drove in the tunnel:

I know that he was from North Carolina, for he used to get Pearce, my brother-in-law and a foreman in the tunnel, to write letters for him to his people there. Pearce liked John Henry because he was sensible and used good manners, and keen and full of good jokes, and he could sing and pick a banjo better than anybody else I ever saw.

My mother used to help out when anybody got hurt in the tunnel. She'd come with clean cloths and medicine. She ran a bearding house there at the tunnel, and baked bread for John Henry. He cooked the rest of his food at the camp, but he couldn't bake bread and Pearce asked my mother to do it for him. I'd often carry it to him at his camp, and he'd give me a little extra for carrying it.

I've seen John Henry playing cards, but I never saw him gambling, and he didn't swear like the other Negroes did when he was at work.

My half-brother, Jim Wimmer, drove steel in the tunnel, and he drove with John Henry when he could get the chance, because John Henry was a good worker at driving steel, and he was sensible and safe, a man of good judgment, with a good eye. There was not so much danger in driving with him in the heading like there was with some of the other drivers. John Henry was a reliable man in danger or in a risky job.

When the first light hole was opened from shaft number one to the east end of the tunnel, I dipped the liquor for the steel-drivers. Every crew tried to put their boss through the hole first, and they fought and

²⁹⁾ Testimony of D. R. Gilpin, Hinton, W. Va., was obtained in Sept., 1925.

³⁰⁾ John Gilpin is remembered in the Big Bend community as a "good Negro-driver".

yelled like mad men. John Henry was a mighty powerful man that day, I tell you. When they pushed my father through the hole, they pushed me through after him, and almost tore off one of my legs in doing it. Then Superintendent Johnson gave me a suit of clothes because I got hurt.

I don't know a thing about John Henry driving steel in a contest with the steam drill, and don't think I ever saw one at the tunnel. Hand drills were used in the tunnel. They were using an engine at shaft number one to raise the bucket up when we moved to the tunnel, but they didn't have any steam engine or steam drill in the tunnel.

The last time I saw John Henry, who was called Big John Henry, was when some rocks from a blast fell on him and another Negro. They were covered with blankets and carried out of the tunnel. I don't think John Henry was killed in that accident because I didn't hear of him being buried, and the bosses were always careful in looking after the injured and dead. They were afraid the Negroes would leave the tunnel.

I don't know what happened to John Henry after that accident, though. He may have left for a while and then come back again, but I can't say. I always thought John Henry died in the tunnel, but I didn't know anything about his death. I don't remember seeing John Henry after the day the rocks fell on him. I might have found out what happened to him if I had tried then, but we were not allowed to go round the camps asking questions about such things. Any man who walked around and talked about the hard life in the tunnel was allowed to stay there about two days, and that's all.

Mr. Gilpin remembers that Henry was the "singinest man I ever saw", but remembers only a few stanzas of his song:

Tell the captain, - huh, I am gone, - huh,
 Tell the captain, - huh, I am gone, - huh,
 Tell the captain, - huh, I 'am gone, - huh,
 Big John Henry, - huh,
 Big John Henry, - huh,
 Big John Henry, - huh,

Seven others were built in the same style on these lines: "The captain can't get me", "Shoo fly up, shoo fly down", "Shoo fly all 'round the town", "This old hammer a-singing", "This old steel a-ringing", "This old sweat a-rolling", and "I am getting dry". Mr. Gilpin says that John Henry always sang "I am getting dry" when he wanted water to drink, and that as water boy he was supposed to carry it. Henry used the "huh", or grunt, to mark the strokes of his hammer.

Mr. Gilpin says that he got his "education" at Big Bend Tunnel. He talks as enthusiastically on Big Bend times as Confederate soldiers often do about the Civil War. Unlike Mr. Miller, he is a hero-worshipper, and John Henry and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway are his heroes. He once looked at a picture of Jack Johnson, the Negro prize fighter, with full chest and muscled arms, and saw only his John Henry of Big Bend days, just as the Confederate veteran saw only his comrades of 1860 in the marching brigades of 1917. He has kept several little reminders of his connection with the road,

and takes pride in wearing its service pins. Big Bend is at the heart of his world, and he knows the place well.

He knew the two doctors who lived at Big Bend at different times while the tunnel was under construction, their families, and not a little of them afterwards. He remembered accurately a surprisingly large number of the foremen and other officials at the tunnel. He knew the engineer who drove the first train through the tunnel. He said his name was South Mack, who is not infrequently remembered in the locality as Seth Mack. He explained how Mack lost his thumbs, by inserting them into a break somewhere in his little engine, after turning it over and getting caught under it, to check the escaping steam to keep from being "scalded to death" before he could be rescued.

The reason Mr. Gilpin offers for Johnson's bringing his father to Big Bend is plausible enough. Water rising in the tunnel was one of the difficulties the engineers had in building it.³¹⁾ He may not have dipped liquor for the men when they opened up the tunnel from shaft one to the east end, but very probably somebody did. The water boy was the proper functionary when liquor became a substitute for water, and it was used freely on such occasions there.³²⁾ The Border Watchman leads one to believe that Mr. Gilpin could have reported a casualty list on this occasion: "We learn that the hands on the East approach to Big Bend Tunnel and those driving the 'heading' east from Shaft 1, having knocked out the rock between them, tried to knock out each other. Several parties were severely stabbed."³³⁾

The song "Shoo Fly" was widely sung on the minstrel stage of the early seventies. A Virginia newspaper observed: "Many persons who are not in the habit of frequenting negro minstrel shows have expressed a desire to know what are the words of a song to which reference is so often made in the newspapers, and the chorus of which salutes the ear in every public place. It is a nonsensical medley without rhyme or reason ... immensely popular with the masses."³⁴⁾ The Governor of West Virginia was reported as singing a part of the song when he "Broke Ground on the C. & O. R. R." in that state.³⁵⁾ Moreover, "miners hoarsely singing" and "sweat a-rolling" belong to the education of Mr. Gilpin at Big Bend. Such echoes, although some of them may not be factual, suggest that he is not entirely a man of fiction.

On my first trip to Hinton, in 1925, I mentioned "John Henry" to Mr. Gilpin, without pointing out specifically any of its details, but he seemed not to know the ballad. He remembered, with difficulty,

³¹⁾ The Greenbrier Independent, Jan. 28, 1871, gives an account of the use of sumps and pumps to keep the water out of the tunnel.

³²⁾ John Henry, p. 30.

³³⁾ The Greenbrier Independent, Feb. 19, 1872.

³⁴⁾ The Staunton Spectator and General Advertiser, Feb. 1, 1870.

³⁵⁾ Wheeling Intelligencer, April 18, 1870.

only a few stanzas of the steel-driver's song. On a second visit about two years later, I again introduced the ballad, and characterized it rather fully. Mr. Gilpin commented thus: "John Henry was always singing. He would sing about his woman, giving her his hammer, wrapping it in gold, gold at the White House, and giving it to his woman, sitting on his mammy's knee, watermelon smiling on the vine, tell the captain I am gone, and like that." But he did not reproduce a single stanza of the ballad, and seemed not to be able to.

The question of Henry's woman had been raised, but no mention made of the White House, although allusion to it is found in several texts of the ballad. And "gold at the White House" is unique in the tradition. He explained: "The White House is where the President lives. John Henry and the other Negroes there in the tunnel used to sing about it, and about going there. They used to sing about Fred Douglas up there too."

He knew Henry's woman, and several others equally important in building the tunnel, and contributed rather full accounts of Lu ---, Liza Ann ---, Kate ---, and one called "Liza Dooley", but thought this not her real name. Some of them claimed to be half Indian. One had long, straight, black hair, and another red hair. One was a fortune-teller and banjo-picker, a woman of unusual vivacity, a sort of pagan beauty, who played at dances and on other occasions of jolification, not infrequently for slightly mixed crowds. He remembered the following stanzas from her singing:

I'm going down to town,
I'm going down to town,
I'm going down to Lynchburg town,
To carry my baccar down.

Baccar selling high,
Selling at a dollar a pound,
And nobody wants to buy.

I pawn my watch,
And I pawn my chain.
Oh go 'long Liza, poor gal,
Poor little Liza Jane.

Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.
Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.

She lost her lover
And found him again.
Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.

She lost her lover
In the bottom of the sea.
Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.

WHAT BECAME OF JOHN HENRY?

If the famous steel-driver was a real man, a flesh and blood man, and actually took part in a drilling-contest at Big Bend, as the testimony shows, one would like to know what became of him. The witnesses do not know. Miller and Gilpin seem to think that he died at the tunnel. John Hedrick is quite certain that he did not, and says that he "went away somewhere".

A strong belief in Henry's death at Big Bend is shown by the popular reports presented in the second chapter of this study. The ballad mentions his death there. Among the Negroes of the community nothing seems more real than his ghost. The ghost's driving steel in the tunnel is highly significant of the manner, as well as the fact, of his death, and modern ghosts are supposed to have such values.¹⁾ Bridge and tunnel ghosts may not always be, if ever, full adoptions, or made from the whole cloth. And building Big Bend Tunnel made possible the only plausible occasion for starting such a belief, factual or fictitious. The character of the tradition seems to favor his actual death there, from a drilling-contest, or in some other way.

The witnesses for Henry are certain of their acquaintance with him at the tunnel, and the conclusion that he died immediately after, and as a result of, the drilling-contest, that reported by Miller and the Hedricks, would seem to dispose of their testimony as lacking authority. This does not necessarily follow.

Among them only Gilpin claims the sort of acquaintance with the steel-driver that would make a confusion between him and another Negro at Big Bend hardly possible, and Gilpin was late in getting to the tunnel, probably almost a year after it was begun. If the drilling-contest occurred early in the work there, as shown by the testimony, and Henry died immediately as a result of it, the steel-driver who took his place among the tunnel Negroes might have resembled him very closely, and was almost certainly called John

¹⁾ A case in point was reported for a tunnel in the state about six months before Big Bend was begun. Hempfield Tunnel, near Wheeling, was "full" of ghosts of murdered men. They were reported as having been seen in the act of being murdered, as the men killed there were. "At the mouth of the tunnel is a sequestered spot known as Berry's Hole. Its name is significant, as its record shows it to be the watery grave of many poor fellows. In the memory of many of our readers the history of Schaffer, the blood-thirsty and brutal murderer, who expiated his crimes on the scaffold at Parkersburg, is still fresh. The slaughter of one of his victims took place in the tunnel is well known and is supposed to have immediate reference to the appearance of the ghost last week ... Other deeds of this kind [in this tunnel] are too well known to bear repetition." *Wheeling Intelligencer*, July 19, 1869.

Henry. He would have been the only John Henry there known to Gilpin and Jenkins, and eventually best known to Miller and the Hedricks, and they might easily have accepted him as the hero of the contest because they had had no particular reason to observe the original John Henry at all closely. Tragedies at the tunnel were not matters for open discussion, and this might explain the failure of Gilpin and Jenkins to hear anything said about the contest. This might also explain Gilpin's failure to remember any stanza of the John Henry song mentioning the fact of his death, or to remember a single stanza of the ballad.

The theory that John Henry died in a second drilling-contest at Big Bend seems less probable, and could hardly have happened without the knowledge of the witnesses for the steel-driver at the tunnel. The introduction, however, of a second machine before the tunnel was completed would have meant a second drilling-contest if Henry won the first without any serious injury to himself, provided he was there at the time.

The drilling-contest established at Big Bend by the testimonial data probably occurred in the summer or fall of 1870. The first work was done on the tunnel in January of that year, beginning the last few days of the month, and J. M. Logan states that he worked four months there before the shafts were in and then returned to Ivanhoe, and that he heard of the contest between Henry and the steam drill when he went back to Ivanhoe. His departure from the tunnel, therefore, was in the summer or early fall, and he heard of the contest soon after. The fact that it occurred at the east end of Big Bend, according to the testimony, shows that it took place early in the work on the tunnel, and that was the first section of the tunnel completed. Between the summer or fall of 1870 and the completion of the tunnel in June, 1872, was a period of practically two years in which a second drilling-contest could have taken place.

The steam drill was at Lewis Tunnel in January and November, and possibly in April, of 1871, and also very probably in 1870 about the time it was being tried at Big Bend. The probability is that the drill characterized as a failure at Lewis Tunnel, but mentioned as being in use there on three occasions covering a period of almost nine months, was not the same drill but two or more drills of different makes, or the same drill operated each time with a different compressor, by way of experiment. Such tests, as well, may have been carried out at Big Bend. The two tunnels were constructed by different men under different contracts, and their character differed in the obstacles offered for the machine. Big Bend was drilled through "hard red shale", and Lewis Tunnel through "hard sandstone with some little slate".²⁾ The failure, therefore, of the drill at Lewis Tunnel would not have meant its failure at Big Bend; and the second drilling-contest there, with the death of the steel-driver as a result, was at least possible and may have occurred.

²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.

In an effort to account for the discrepancy between the testimony and the popular report of Henry's death as a result of the drilling-contest, the theory that the steel-driver met his death in some other way at the tunnel and that the report of the event became confused with that of the contest through oral transmission seems more probable. It leads to an inquiry as to the actual conditions under which the tunnel was built.

The testimony is highly suggestive but inadequate for a full understanding of the tragic circumstances at Big Bend, as becomes increasingly evident as one examines the construction of heavy tunnels in Europe and America during the second half of the 19th century. The startling number of casualties from building Mt. Ceniz and the Hoosac tunnels³⁾ indicates the incorrectness of such a statement as that of John Hedrick that none was killed in Big Bend. Miller's report that bodies of Negroes killed in the tunnel, along with that of a mule, were buried in the big fill at the east portal is much less improbable. Many of the foremen and other officials on the road had been in the Confederate Army. It was not always convenient there to bury the dead properly, or to advertise the casualty list as a means of keeping up the morale of the forces. That it was necessary to protect the morale of the Negroes at Big Bend and that those in charge were not always equal to the task can hardly be doubted. A brief account of the circumstances there will show that the place was not in the least inviting. Miller's statement that all the Negroes refused to go into the tunnel for several days on one occasion seems to be common knowledge in the neighborhood. It was the only detail the widow of Jeff Davis, previously mentioned, could remember at all distinctly about the construction of the tunnel when I visited her in September, 1925.⁴⁾

Nordhoff states that the laborers on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway were mostly Negroes, ignorant, and "much crowded together" in the tunnels.⁵⁾ The number of such laborers in Big Bend during the two years and a half of its construction was probably about 1,000. The number for Musconetcong Tunnel was 1,000,⁶⁾ and that for Hoosac, 900.⁷⁾ Big Bend is about one-third longer than the former, and one-third of the length of the latter. But the labor of Hoosac Tunnel was "chiefly of the kind termed 'skilled labor', the underground workers being, for the most part, regularly bred miners (a large porportion of them being of the very best Cornish miners)."⁸⁾ Big Bend was built with ignorant, superstitious Negroes "much crowded together" in the tunnel.

³⁾ P. 69.

⁴⁾ A similar act on the part of laborers at Midland Tunnel was noted in the *Wheeling Intelligencer*, March 8, 1871.

⁵⁾ *New York Weekly Tribune*, Oct. 18 and Nov. 1, 1871.

⁶⁾ *The Railroad Gazette*, VII (June, 1875), 241.

⁷⁾ *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, XCI (1871), 148.

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, XCI, 148.

The following lines, under the title "Big Bend Times",⁹⁾ published with apologies by a local newspaper about six months after the road was completed across the state, was written presumably by an employee at the tunnel, and is the only published account from the inside of Big Bend known to exist:

Big Bend times now pass before me,
Tunnel scenes of long ago;
With the loose rock hanging o'er me,
More dangerous far than human foe.
Days that knew no time of leisure,
Days from working never free;
When the hopeful dreamed of pleasure,
When the tunnel through should be.
Fancy hears the hammers ringing --
Sounds that now my dream annoy --
And the miners hoarsely singing
'Can't you drive her home, my boy?'
Hears the bosses loudly swearing
At some idler whom they see,
Who plainly is not caring
When the tunnel through should be.
What though looser roofs beset me,
Though down deeper shafts I go;
Yet I never will forget thee,
Number two, of long ago.
And when railroad life is ended,
Oh! what pleasure we could see,
If we owned the means expended,
That the tunnel through should be.

That Big Bend was not altogether a pastoral scene has support from the inside of Mt. Ceniz. In that tunnel "one was almost smothered so great was the heat; the smoke from the blasts became so thick that the light of the lamps was visible no farther than a few steps." The writer describes blasting there: "Suddenly an infernal noise burst upon us from the end of the gallery. One would have said that ten thousand hammers were falling simultaneously on their anvils. A sharp whistling sound made itself heard above this clamor, piercing you to the very marrow."¹⁰⁾ Clouds of "yellow smoke come pouring through the tunnel in such density and volume as to be positively painful."¹¹⁾ The inferno of St. Gothard was hardly more inviting: "As the work progressed the temperature rose and the air became more vitiated, until visitors were rarely permitted to enter because of the sheer danger of being in such an atmosphere, and the horses on the job died at the rate of ten a month. The scene in the scantily lighted tunnel grew to resemble an inferno, men going about

⁹⁾ The Mountain Herald, Hinton, W. Va., Jan. 1, 1874.

¹⁰⁾ Every Saturday, Oct. 14, 1871.

¹¹⁾ Wheeling Intelligencer, Dec. 30, 1870.

naked in the intense heat."¹²⁾ In such tangible darkness, heat, noise, and smoke, the "loose rock" overhead would seem to promise immediate relief; and nothing "haunts the mine worker more than a fall of the strata which he calls the roof."¹³⁾

Drinker explains that "no man but a tunnel engineer can appreciate the difficulties and dangers of tunnel construction -- it is not a question of calculating certain strains and allowing certain factors of safety, but a very vying with the unknown powers of darkness, all the more to be feared because one can never know what a day's advance may bring forth."¹⁴⁾ Of these uncertainties, tunnel-sickness, blasting, and the roof seem to offer the greatest dangers to life, and Big Bend had a full share of all three.

In the St. Gothard Tunnel, "men died in large numbers of a peculiar disease, called tunnel trichinosis ... Three or four months' labor in the tunnel brought on the disease."¹⁵⁾ It is not certain that this disease affected any of the Virginia Negroes on the Chesapeake and Ohio, but the fact that horses on the job at St. Gothard died at the rate of ten a month suggests the great probability of deaths at Big Bend from some kind of sickness. The statement that "foul air gives much trouble and there is a great deal of sickness among the employes" of Big Bend¹⁶⁾ is significant, and very much so when John Hedrick, one of the tunnel officials, admits that one died there from foul air. Twenty-three suits, alleging damages amounting to almost five hundred thousand dollars "for death, injury, or sickness" of workmen on a tunnel under construction in the county adjoining that in which Big Bend lies, are awaiting trial at the present time. "Silicosis from dust particles" seems to be the basis for the complaints. Six are already dead.¹⁷⁾ What are the probabilities for Big Bend?

Foul air was one of the greatest tunnel problems of the period, and nothing very effective was done about it. The practice of pumping fresh air to the drillers was, it seems, first emphasized at Arlberg Tunnel, which was begun in 1880. Stone dust, to which "miners' consumption" was largely attributable, was checked even later by the introduction of hollow drills with a small stream of water running through them. In Mt. Ceniz "one was almost smothered so great was the heat"; in St. Gothard the men went "about naked in the intense heat"; and in Big Bend the steel-drivers worked with their "shirts off". Blasting and the crude ways of lighting tunnels at the time added to their foulness.

An idea of the amount of explosives for blasting and of candles for lighting used in Big Bend Tunnel may be had from an examination of their use in the Hoosac Tunnel. The records show that "during

¹²⁾ New York Times, March 16, 1930.

¹³⁾ G. G. Carson. Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner, p. 151.

¹⁴⁾ Tunnelling, p. 486.

¹⁵⁾ Tunnelling (3rd ed., 1893), p. 367.

¹⁶⁾ Wheeling Daily Register, May 21, 1872.

¹⁷⁾ Morgantown Post, Sept. 6, 1932.

five years' time, about 444,735 lbs. of nitroglycerine and about 100,000 lbs. of mica powder [mica impregnated with nitroglycerin] were used" in Hoosac,¹⁸⁾ making about 500,000 pounds of pure nitroglycerin used in the tunnel in five years. The assumption that half of this amount of nitroglycerin was used at Big Bend during the two years and a half it was under construction gives 250,000 pounds for that work, approximately equal to 500,000 pounds of dualin or 3,250,000 pounds of gunpowder in explosive force, a daily amount of 333 pounds of nitroglycerin or 4,333 pounds of gunpowder for 750 days. The record for 2,720 pounds of candles used in one heading of the Hoosac Tunnel during a period of seven months, from April 1 to November 1 of 1865,¹⁹⁾ gives a basis for the amounts used in the eight headings of Big Bend during two years and a half, a total of more than 87,000 pounds, a daily consumption of more than 115 pounds.

That nitroglycerin, dualin, and gunpowder were all three used in Big Bend is quite certain. They were used together on the road for blasting in other tunnels. Drinker gives "powder, trinitroglycerine, and dualin employed" at Lewis Tunnel and "nitro-glycerine and powder employed for blasting" at Stretcher's Neck.²⁰⁾ There seems to be no basis for the relative quantities of these explosives used in Big Bend Tunnel. That candles were the main source of light in Big Bend is very improbable. Like hand drills, "lard oil and blackstrap" are too well connected with the tunnel to be only incidental to its construction. Any concession, however, in quantity or quality of materials for lighting added to the darkness or to the general foulness of the place, and possibly to both.

In Big Bend Tunnel the vitiated air, from unusual heat, blasting, burning blackstrap, and from other sources, became a serious problem for the engineers of that work and delayed the drilling there "considerably",²¹⁾ a situation to say the least very harmful to the laborers and may have resulted in heavy casualties.

Blasting was the second great danger to life in Big Bend Tunnel. The employment of explosives, even where the greatest care is exercised in handling them, rarely fails to take its toll. The press records of the second half of the 19th century for users of blasting agents are not unlike those of the first quarter of the 20th for aviators. Gunpowder, mica powder, dualin, dynamite -- all have their records.

The most dangerous explosive used in tunnels during the period was nitroglycerin, so dangerous in its liquid state that the Nitroglycerin Act was passed in 1869, by which "act the use of nitroglycerine per se was absolutely prohibited, but power was reserved to the Secretary of State specially to license any substance having nitro-glycerine, in any form, as one of its component parts."²²⁾ As

¹⁸⁾ Tunnelling, p. 244.

¹⁹⁾ Ibid., p. 237.

²⁰⁾ Ibid., p. 965.

²¹⁾ Greenbrier Independent, June 1, 1872.

²²⁾ The Library Magazine, I (1883), 410.

late as 1871 the editors of the *Scientific American* were hammering against the general and indiscriminate use of nitroglycerin in the United States, and added that its "black record will keep increasing so long as nitro-glycerin is used as a blasting agent."²³⁾ Alfred Bernhard Nobel, Swedish manufacturer of explosives and philanthropist, invented dynamite in his factory at Glasgow, Scotland, in the late sixties, by way of escape from the unavoidable contingencies upon the indiscriminate use of the liquid material, particularly from the results of its poisonous character through actual contact with the substance and from the danger of its "liability to percolate through fissures in the rock, and to give rise to subsequent accidents when the escaped liquid was struck by a pick, perhaps at a considerable distance from the original hole."²⁴⁾ To avoid these objections to the use of nitroglycerin, the substance was supplied in a frozen form for the miners at Hoosac Tunnel, by G. M. Mowbray, an experienced chemist, who manufactured the explosive at the tunnel.²⁵⁾ That such precautions were taken against the dangers of nitroglycerin in the hands of Negroes "much crowded together" in Big Bend Tunnel and elsewhere on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad seems to lack support from the records of that work.

Falls of rock present a third great danger to laborers in building tunnels. Falls in the tunnels on the Cincinnati and Southern were very heavy, from seven tunnels on the line amounting to 8,763 cubic yards.²⁶⁾ Board Tree Tunnel on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia is notable in that respect. "The treacherous character of the roof of this tunnel led to many accidents from falls ... cost many lives, and maimed many of the men. These casualties seemed confined more particularly to the miners and laborers."²⁷⁾ In this connection one of the reasons given for the expensiveness of the work on the tunnels of that road in West Virginia was the "difficulty of maintaining a supply of suitable skilled labor in the face of the perpetual risk of life and limb."

That Big Bend was equally dangerous, if not more so, can be readily shown. The tunnel was constructed through "hard red shale crumbling on exposure".²⁸⁾ A local newspaper states: "On last Saturday morning there was a great slide in the West Portal of the Great Bend Tunnel. The slide is estimated at 8,000 cubic yards."²⁹⁾ The treacherousness of its roof is noted in another report soon after trains began to pass through Big Bend. "The cars run slowly through the tunnel, as rock is constantly falling from the unfinished portion, and a few days ago the timbers fell in with such force as to destroy

²³⁾ *Scientific American*, XXIV (Jan. 14, 1871), 36.

²⁴⁾ *The Library Magazine*, I, 410 ff.

²⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, I, 412. *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, XCI, 148.

²⁶⁾ *Tunnelling*, p. 966.

²⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 958.

²⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 965.

²⁹⁾ *Greenbrier Independent*, June 1, 1872.

the rails."³⁰) The failure of the timber arch to hold up the roof of the tunnel was the reason for replacing it with a brick arch, beginning in the eighties.³¹)

In addition to tunnel-sickness, blasting, and falls of rock, many other dangers faced the steel-driver at Big Bend. A local newspaper on one occasion mentions that "two negro men were found dead in the woods near that place ... Greenbrier seems to be full of dead negroes. They are doubtless men who having been paid off by the C. and O. R. R. are murdered by their companions, on their way home, to secure their money."³²) The steel-driver might have been killed in pursuit of his white woman in the neighborhood, by getting stabbed in a fight, or possibly in a "drunken brawl" at the tunnel.

Although liquor was supposed to be prohibited by contract around the tunnels on the Chesapeake and Ohio,³³) its free use at Big Bend added to the unfavorable circumstances there for safety. Gilpin says that he dipped the liquor for the steel-drivers when they opened the tunnel from east end to shaft one, and Jenkins says that Captain Johnson gave a barrel of liquor when they knocked through the heading from shafts two to three. On the occasion Gilpin mentions "several parties were severely stabbed",³⁴) and one might infer that the "parties" were intoxicated from something. The occasion Jenkins mentions gains favor from "Number two" of "Big Bend Times". Jeff Washington says that "every bunch of grass in the neighborhood had a bottle in it".³⁵) When the "headings between shaft one and two were driven together ... all parties repaired to head quarters where a barrel of old Bourbon whiskey, was rolled out and a general jollification ensued ... Though a few knives and pistols, boney fists and strong sinewy arms were flourished we have no casualties to report."³⁶)

Liquor among these ignorant Negroes "much crowded together" in Big Bend enhanced the dangers to life there, and rendered them much more likely victims of the unexpected explosions in the tunnel and the threatening rock above their heads. Americans, white and black, handle themselves with abandon in such an environment, and yet "no casualties to report" characterizes the press accounts of the laborers at Big Bend from first to last. I have failed to find a record of a single death inside the tunnel.

³⁰) Railroad Gazette, Nov. 2, 1872.

³¹) J. P. Nelson, in *The Chesapeake and Ohio Railway*, p. 27, says of Big Bend: "The rock formation is very hard, but disintegrates under the weather, so much so that at the time of the construction of the brick arch, large cavities, sometimes fifty feet deep, were found above the timber arch." Judge Miller, who lived a long life in the larger Big Bend neighborhood, calls the tunnel a "death-trap". J. H. Miller. *History of Summers County*, p. 487.

³²) John Henry, p. 30.

³³) P. 53.

³⁴) P. 73.

³⁵) John Henry, p. 30.

The press of Virginia and West Virginia, which apparently remained silent on casualties in the tunnels of the New River region, was able to give startling numbers of deaths from the construction of tunnels farther away. A local newspaper, published on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia, carried the casualty list for the Hoosac: "a hundred and thirty-six men have been killed by casualties in the course of construction of the tunnel."³⁷) Another newspaper of the state has the following to say of deaths at Mt. Ceniz Tunnel: "It has been told that more than 1,000 workmen have lost their lives up to 1870; but the guides and directors declare that not more than fifty or sixty had been killed outright, though a number of others had been seriously wounded ... It is not improbable ... that ... at least 1,000 men have lost their lives."³⁸) The *Scientific American* gives a similar list of deaths for Mt. Ceniz: "Many lives have necessarily been lost during this great work, but far less than one would suppose; probably from 600 to 800 in all, so far as we have heard from time to time."³⁹) After making an examination of "government statistics", a more recent writer says, "We kill in our coal mines more than three times as many per thousand employed as are killed in France or Belgium, and nearly three times as many as are killed in Great Britain ... in spite of the fact that the coal mines of the United States may be more easily worked and with less danger than those of any other coal-producing country in the world."⁴⁰)

That dangers to life in any European tunnel or coal mine per square inch were greater than those in Big Bend would be hard to show. That a heavy casualty list belongs to the construction of the tunnel seems most certain. It follows that John Henry had about an equal break at Big Bend, and might have died there from disease, from falls in the heading, or from one of a dozen other dangers, with the strong probability that the account of his end from any of these causes would have been confused with that of his drilling-contest in common report. If he was actually killed in the tunnel, and if his death seemed to threaten the morale of his gang, and eventually that of others, almost a certain consequence of the event, the management in all probability encouraged such a consummation by way of diverting the attention of the community from the tragic possibilities of the place. Henry's death in this way would more likely have occurred about the time the tunnel was completed. The dangers from foul air and blasting increased proportionately as the work progressed farther and farther from the shafts, and from the ends of the tunnel. The dangers from falls in the heading became greater and greater as the "hard red shale crumbling on exposure" had time for disintegration. Death of the steel-driver at this time from any of the tunnel dangers

³⁷) *Kanawha Chronicle*, Dec. 17, 1873.

³⁸) *Wheeling Intelligencer*, Dec. 30, 1870.

³⁹) XXIV, 55.

⁴⁰) *Letters from a Workman* (1908), by An American Mechanic, p. 153 ff.

would satisfy the belief of Miller and Gilpin, two of the important witnesses for his presence at the tunnel, and would not be in conflict with the actual knowledge of either of the other three witnesses, Jenkins and the Hedrick brothers. His end in the tunnel would satisfy the local fear of his ghost, and the confusion of the event with that of the drilling-contest in common report would satisfy popular belief in his death as a result of the contest.

The recent report, before the Interstate Commerce Commission,⁴¹⁾ of the original cost of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, with its antecedents and subsidiaries, failed to take into account the waste of man power in building the road, and may be regarded as an official expression on the question of deaths at Big Bend. John Hedrick, who had some responsibility in building the tunnel, is quite certain that nobody was killed there, and insists that John Henry "went away somewhere". While the construction of Big Bend Tunnel without a casualty list can be explained only as a miraculous performance, the possibility that Henry left the tunnel at some time subsequent to his drilling-contest may be considered.

Following his trail from that locality, however, seems hardly possible, and actually finding him at best not unlike drawing a "perfect hand" in bridge, an enormous uncertainty for the individual player. The problem would be sufficiently challenging if there were only one John Henry, and he a man of highly domestic habits. Instead, the country is full of men named John Henry, actual and alleged, and they have travelled everywhere, as the second chapter of this study indicates.⁴²⁾ Many of the laborers on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia were Virginia Negroes, and possibly the steel-driver came from that state.

F. R. Pyle, contractor of Huntington, West Virginia, reports his aunt, widow of Contractor McIntyre who had a hand in building the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, as "confident that there was such a negro at the tunnel, but that his name was John Henry Hardy." He adds: "A man by the name of Banks whose father was a foreman at the tunnel says that the negro was born at Winchester, Virginia, on the Henry plantation, passed to a man by the name of Hardy who married in the Henry family, and that he was an illegitimate child, and sometimes gave his name as Williamson - - not Williams." J. A. Williams, Negro of Lynchburg, Virginia, "knew all the construction gangs in the South a quarter of a century ago, and back", and has this to say about Henry:

The steel-driver's name was John Henry Mundy, of Louisa County, Virginia. He has several relatives about there now. His pal was Lewis Thursty, and he had a brother named Bob Thursty, from near Knoxville, Tennessee, or from Alabama.

Henry was large frame man, and light red color. He died in Kentucky, on Big Sandy Railroad, or L. and N.

⁴¹⁾ Valuation Dockets 457 and 477.

⁴²⁾ Cf. John Henry, p. 12 ff.

I expected some trouble with Henry's irregular family connections at Winchester, but the "several relatives" in Louisa County should know something about him. Their complete silence, however, is not unlike that of his several relatives in Henry County of the same state where he is supposed to be John Henry Martin. Henry's relation to Hardy, Mundy, and Martin may develop into something eventually, but at present it seems rather dubious. He is sufficiently difficult without such relationships.

An example of what one may expect to find on the trail of John Henry can be shown from investigations in Norfolk, Virginia. Three Negroes with the hero's name were mentioned as being there at some time during the construction of Big Bend Tunnel. The Federal Census report of 1870 for that city gives the name of a Negro boy John Henry, fifteen years old. The local newspaper mentions a John Henry on two different occasions. On the former, "John Henry, negro seaman on the brig S. P. Brown, charged with mutiny, was turned over to his captain."⁴³) On the latter, "John Henry, negro, was arrested late Tuesday evening upon complaint of another negro named Frank Allen, who charged him with stealing a boat belonging to him. Henry denied the theft, and alleged that he borrowed the boat from another man. During the night he attempted to break out of the watch house. He tore off one of the planks in the bunk, and with it endeavored to force the iron bars across the window, but without success."⁴⁴) The city directory of Norfolk and Portsmouth for 1900 contains the name of one Negro John Henry, and for 1920 two Negroes named John Henry. Living in Norfolk-Portsmouth in 1927 were two Negroes by the name of John Henry, one from North Carolina and one from South Carolina, and a third by the name of Jack Henry, from King William County, Virginia. They were all three heads of families, and claimed no kinship with each other.

Mention of nine by the name of John Henry indicates the possibility of a much larger number in that locality during the period. In the summer of 1927, I got on the trail there of an old Negro named John Henry, famed for his prowess in breaking "old iron" for the "junk houses" on Water Street. I soon found that this John Henry was confused with two other old Negroes by the same name in that immediate section. One of them had distinguished himself as a watermelon-catcher in unloading boats at the docks just below Water Street. The other was a rival in breaking old iron on Water Street, for T. M. Cashin, N. Block and Company, and the Eagle Iron Works, and for M. T. Cashin at the foot of Roanoke Dock, near Water Street. The two old iron-breakers were known by the people they worked for, and those they worked with, by various names, such as "Old Henry", "Big Henry", "Black Henry", and "John Henry", and occasionally by other names to distinguish one from the other.

⁴³) The Norfolk Virginian, Nov. 3, 1870.
⁴⁴) Ibid., June 29, 1871.

Charlie Shaw, who appeared to be an important man in M. T. Cashin's junk yard, made a typical report of the two men:

There were two old men around here who used to break up old iron. Both of them were real black men. I call one of them Daddy, and it hasn't been so long since he worked for us. His name was Robinson, but I don't know the rest of it. I think he lived over in Berkley. I called him Daddy and the other fellow John Henry, but he was bigger than John Henry. He'd weigh 270 pounds and John Henry about 200.

John Henry has been dead 12 or 15 years. He was just naturally a better man than anybody I know of. He could do more work, and do it easier.

We used to give him a job breaking up old iron, and he'd go out and look it over and sit there and think about it, and then go home sometimes and not do a lick of work that day. Next morning early he'd go at it, and have it done and be sitting down looking at it as pleased before you'd think he'd hardly begun. He'd look and plan, and he didn't lose any licks.

I have seen him break iron 12 inches thick. He'd knock big wheels and anchors all to pieces. He could break more iron in two hours than anybody else in a day. He worked by the job or by the ton, and I never knowed him to do any other sort of work.

He'd always sing about the steel-driver John Henry when he was breaking iron. He was called Old Henry, Big Henry, or Black Henry, as well as John Henry, and he said he'd been everywhere.

I don't know anything about him when he wasn't around here. He'd come around about once a month to see if he could get a job.

Daddy has left town and gone out in the country to live, and I don't know where he is. John Henry was 45 or 50 when he died. I don't know where he died, but somewhere in town here. He died from drinking too much liquor.

Mr. Shaw displayed the hammers or sledges these iron-breakers used when they were working for M. T. Cashin. Daddy's was a twenty-pound sledge, with a four-foot handle; and Henry's a thirty-pound sledge, with a three-foot handle. T. M. Cashin displayed a seventy-pound sledge, with a three-foot handle, which he claims John Henry used to break old iron for him; but T. M. Cashin, like several others on Water Street, did not distinguish between the two old Negroes in his references to John Henry.

While the Negro Mr. Shaw characterizes as John Henry is not altogether unlike the steel-driver of Big Bend fame, his age and his singing of the "steel-driver John Henry" seem to bar his identification as the original John Henry. When Mr. Shaw made his report, in 1927, he was quite certain that the iron-breaker was not more than fifty years of age at the time of his death.

The trail of the steel-driver leads to another example at first of greater promise, but ultimately of greater disappointment. In February, 1929, J. S. Barker⁴⁶) "investigated pretty thoroughly among

⁴⁶) St. Albans, W. Va.

the older employees of the Chesapeake and Ohio" who were then living in St. Albans, West Virginia, "to ascertain the reality of a John Henry". Mr. Barker writes:

There is a Jeff Washington here now who is quite a personage in connection with early employees of the C. and O. Ry. Jeff left his home near Charlottesville at the age of 18 years and, together with John Henry who was a few years his senior, employed themselves to a C. and O. contractor, a Mr. Johnson, who was clearing away the timber from the proposed right-of-way at White Sulphur Springs, W. Va.

This was about 1868, and Jeff continued without break or blemish in the employ of the C. and O. for 50 years. He is now on the retired list of the C. and O. at a comfortable salary ...

Jeff said that John Henry lived at the little town of Keswick just east of Charlottesville and has a sister who now lives in Charlottesville. He also says that there was a John Hardy who worked with them in the Big Bend tunnel. John Hardy died while they worked at the Big Bend, and John Henry died while they worked at the Lewis Tunnel.

In my conversation with Capt. Mallory, who also worked for the C. & O. then and until he reached his retiring age, said that while he could not positively identify John Henry as having worked at this particular place and time, he recalled having heard his men, who worked under him, sing that song, 'You killed John Henry, but you won't kill me.'

The Captain also recalled that it was here at these places where the Burley Diamond Drill was first used and with steam power.

The story as related to me by Frank Crosby was that this man John Henry and his helper had become expert with the hammer and drill, and they challenged the steam driller for a contest hole, in which John Henry and his helper won out, but John Henry lost his life. John Henry was six feet tall, yellow, and powerful physically.

Some time ago the Charleston Daily Mail, in one of its Sunday issues, in an article on the early history of W. Va. denied that there really was a John Henry who had worked for the C & O at the Big Bend tunnel.

Jeff Washington and Frank Cosby, both of whom worked for the C & O in the Big Bend at the time of its construction, say that there was a John Henry.

About two months after getting this report, I visited Jeff Washington at his home, a very old man whose mind seemed to "come and go". Occasionally he was seemingly reticent about Big Bend affairs, but for the most part talked rather freely, and at times rather inconsistently. He remembered the tunnel as a good place to save money because there was nothing in the neighborhood to spend it for, but later stated that the younger men, including himself, wasted all the money they got there, and added that "every bunch of grass in the neighborhood had a bottle in it."

He repeated the story of his going with John Henry from Keswick, near Charlottesville, Virginia, to work on the Chesapeake and Ohio in West Virginia. He said that he and Henry first worked "bushing" on the road near White Sulphur Springs, then in Lewis Tunnel near

there, and eventually went farther west to work on Big Bend, that Henry kept a piece of ribbon tied on the handle of his hammer, and that nobody could get it off. He described Henry as not real black, of average height, and weight about 160 pounds. He said that he did not see a steam drill on the road, and that he knew nothing of Henry's drilling-contest. He was certain that he knew nothing of the death of the steel-driver at Big Bend, and that he has not seen Henry or heard anything from him since they were together in the tunnel. He remembered hearing at Big Bend about the time it was completed that Henry had been killed there and his body thrown into the big fill. He seemed very anxious to be reported as not believing the story of Henry's burial. Yet he explained that a "great many were killed in the tunnel and buried anywhere around there."

Jeff Washington made no reference to John Hardy in giving this account of John Henry. Then I inquired of his acquaintance with Hardy at Big Bend. He answered that he had never seen Hardy on the road or elsewhere, but that he had heard of him. Later, however, he used the name Hardy two or three times for that of Henry in speaking of the steel-driver, seemingly a clear case of confusing the two names after Hardy had been mentioned. He recalled having heard of the article which Mr. Barker read in the Charleston Daily Mail, and which on the authority of hearsay had substituted the name John Hardy for that of John Henry as the famous steel-driver at Big Bend Tunnel. In all probability the name Hardy was brought into the conversation Mr. Barker had with Jeff Washington soon after the article appeared, resulting in the incorrect report the former made from the latter of Henry's and Hardy's death.

While John Henry seems not to have a sister living in Charlottesville, Jeff Washington's account of Henry's connections there offers something definite for further inquiries. There are three Negro families by the name of Henry in the section, with five members named John Henry: one family with three now living who are descendants of Adam Henry, a slave of Garrett White, of North Garden, ten miles from Charlottesville; another family with two, father and son, who were slaves of Professor John Staige Davis, of the University of Virginia. The first three were not old enough to help build the Chesapeake and Ohio across West Virginia. The other two were fifty-five and thirty-one respectively when the road was begun in 1870.

Charles James,⁴⁶⁾ of Keswick, who talked volumes about slavery and Civil War times, says:

Noah Reasby and John Henry were friends in tunnels and other work. Noah Reasby drove steel last in the Catskill Mountains to bring water into New York City.

I had a niece and uncle who lived at Whitehall, New York State, and my niece owned a place right where the water tunnel was made, and she was paid and water put in her house. Uncle lived in Whitehall, and was a blacksmith.

⁴⁶⁾ Testimony obtained in Aug., 1929.

Uncle was named John Henry after his father who was John Henry. His mother was named Judy Henry. She had one son named Charles James, and he was my father, and then she married John Henry and had a son John Henry. Uncle John Henry was bound to Professor Davis in the University of Virginia, and his mother was too.

Uncle worked on the C and O Railroad, and I did too, when they were building it, a long time before he went to Whitehall. He was at Big Bend Tunnel, but he won't the great steel-driver there. That John Henry got killed. I didn't see him when I was there, but Dick Morris and Noah Reasby did. They said that John Henry was a great steel-driver at Big Bend, and talked about him as long as they lived. They both died about ten years ago here near Keswick.

Although Mr. James was certain that his Uncle John Henry was not the great steel-driver at Big Bend, the statement that he worked on the Chesapeake and Ohio in West Virginia made an investigation at Whitehall necessary, and a letter to Mr. H. E. Sullivan, of the Historical Society of Whitehall, brought the following answer:

This day I interviewed the daughters of John L. Henry and found as follows:

The head of the family never came to Whitehall, but his wife Judy visited here about 1870 for six weeks. Judy was married twice. By first husband she had a son Charles James and three daughters. By the second she had John Lewis Henry and William, who lived at Charlottesville, Va...

John L. Henry, son of John and Judy, was born in east room of U. Va. Aug. 15, 1839 and d. at Whitehall June 24, 1911. He learned the blacksmith trade and is said to have worked in a Confederate arsenal. Later he became the body servant of Lieut. Wm. Boyd of this town who brought him to Whitehall on his return in 1865. He worked at his trade here from 1867 until his death and was considered the best in town. I knew him well. He always shod our horses and did any other work in his line which we had. He was, with his family, a member of the Methodist Church and was a good man in every way and was highly respected.

May 18, 1867 he married Emma Baltimore, daughter of George and Jenett Jackson Baltimore, and they had the following children:

Marietta B.	b. May 17, 1868	
Julia	b. Nov. 26, 1870	d. June 10, 1880
Georgiana	b. Aug. 18, 1874	d. January 7, 1894
Isabella V.	b. Nov. 24, 1878	
Robert Lewis	b. Sept 17, 1880	d. March 30, 1882

Marietta (Matey) and Isabella (Belle) live in the family homestead, purchased 1867 ... Both are cripples ...

There is no large water system so far north ...

Mr. James says that his uncle was at Big Bend before going to New York, but Mr. Sullivan takes him out of the South five years before the tunnel was begun. Developments from trying to clear up this confusion by writing letters resulted in a trip to Whitehall in the spring of 1930 and a second to Keswick in the summer following.

It seemed important to determine whether this John Henry was actually in the South during the construction of the tunnel.

In Whitehall I failed to find anything of a documentary sort to show that he returned to Virginia after leaving in 1865. The family letters had been destroyed, and no newspaper files for the period seem to exist. His two daughters, Matey and Belle, were certain that he did not return after his trip north with Boyd, and their neighbors, those around sixty or seventy years of age, agreed, with varying degrees of sureness, that he could not have been at Big Bend Tunnel. However, Joseph Chapelle and George Brown, older residents of Whitehall, claimed that they knew him well, and thought it quite probable that he returned to the South to work on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, at least during winter --- about half of the year at Whitehall in the seventies,⁴⁷⁾ --- in his greater effort to pay for the home he had recently bought. Mr. Chapelle worked around 1870 for the National Transportation Line, on the canal through Whitehall. He said that Henry shod mules for the same company at the time, and that activities were suspended there during winter. He said that Henry's shop was often closed in winter around 1870, but failed to remember how long it stayed closed. He was not certain that it was always open in the summer, and knew that the company's mules were shod at other shops as well as at Henry's.

Nobody in Whitehall seemed to know a great deal about Henry, not even his two daughters. They knew that he had received hard treatment from being bound out as a slave, but they knew nothing of the circumstances. They knew that he had some trouble with his back, and that their mother "rubbed it". A large number of men there, who as boys had "brushed flies" for Henry while he was shoeing horses, remembered that he had trouble with his back. Some of them thought that marks on his shoulders and back were callouses from wearing a yoke to pull a plow or to carry water when he was bound out, and others were quite sure that the marks were only prominent muscles. They had seen Henry working in the shop with his shirt open and his sleeves up, and all agreed that he was a very strong man. That he had lifted a mule on his shoulder on one occasion was a matter of common report. Mr. Sullivan thought, perhaps, while Henry was very reticent about his early life, and all of his particularly intimate affairs, that he talked somewhat freely with two old "rounders" with whom he associated a great deal before becoming a member of the church. But these two men are gone from Whitehall.

Such closeness on the part of Henry to old "rounders" would seem to upset Mr. Sullivan's earlier statement that he was a "good man in every way", but this report was based on the later years of Henry's life. Nobody in Whitehall, of course, reported Henry as a bad man at any period of his career. He was known to play cards

⁴⁷⁾ Mr. Brown says that he worked only six months a year at that time, and lived through the winter on his savings from the summer.

and drink occasionally, but never seen gambling or drunk; and on occasion to forget his domestic obligations, but not in any way that would characterize him as lacking real manliness. His associates were largely white people, and they held him in high esteem from the time of his arrival in Whitehall. He was "never ugly or boisterous", and after joining the church he always spoke of the devil as "Mr. Satan". He had "good manners", although he never learned to write, and his letters were always written by some member of his family.

Henry was in the habit of singing as he worked in the shop such songs as "Old Black Joe" and "Shoo Fly". He often chanted "tunes" to his hammer and anvil, and was greatly attached to them.

His younger daughter remembered that he spoke of working on the railroad at some time, but knew nothing definite about the matter, but they both insisted that he did not work on any road in the South after going to Whitehall in 1865. The older was less than two years of age when Big Bend Tunnel was begun, and the younger was born six years after its completion. The former can not be considered an authority on the activities of her father while she was only two or three years old, and hardly better than the latter who can report only hearsay for the early seventies. Their lack of definite knowledge, even from hearsay reports in the family, of their father during the seventies and eighties, as well as his earlier life, no doubt because of his reticence about such matters, makes possible his consideration as the original John Henry. Several definite connections seem to exist between the two.

Of his four daughters, the second was named Julia, born about eight months after W. R. Johnson got the contract for the construction of Big Bend Tunnel, and the third was named Georgiana, born about two years after the tunnel was built. In about half of the texts of the ballad, "Julia Ann" appears as the steel-driver's wife, woman, or baby. The "white house", from which the steel-driver is taken to the tunnel to drive and to which after the contest he is taken injured or dead, may be a variation of Whitehall, the home of John L. Henry at the time. Moreover, his singing "Shoo Fly" and other tunes as he worked in his shop, his attachment to his hammer and anvil, his "good manners", association with white people, superior strength, lack of ability to write, - - all are in keeping with the direct and popular reports for the original John Henry, who sang "Shoo Fly" at Big Bend, associated with white people, and got the Gilpin family to write letters for him to his family in North Carolina, possibly a confusion with New York. He required "good manners" for his contacts at the tunnel, as Mr. Gilpin represents him, and something of the sort, echoed in the Henry tradition, almost certainly contributed to the belief in the great steel-driver as a good man, not infrequently too good for anything of consequence. Doubtlessly such apparent connections would be sufficient for the identification of Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

When Big Bend was begun in 1870, John L. Henry was thirty-one years old, weight around 170 pounds, height about five feet eight

inches, and almost black. At his home I was able to get a photograph, made about 1870, of him in his "Sunday clothes", and presented a copy of it to Mr. Gilpin and the Hedrick brothers for their judgement of him as the steel-driver. After careful examination they agreed that it was not altogether unlike the Negro they knew at the tunnel, but only his face and hands were exposed in the photograph, and they remembered him most distinctly as a man of energy, a man of action, with full chest and muscled arms and shoulders. Besides, he was not quite tall enough for Mr. Gilpin and George Hedrick, and slightly too stout for John Hedrick. The writer then sought the opinion of Jeff Washington, who gave it with little more than a glance at the photograph. The feet seemed to amuse him, and yet they are very good Negro feet, as good or better than Jeff's own. Nevertheless, he was certain that they were not the feet of the John Henry he knew on the Chesapeake and Ohio.

The identification, therefore, of John L. Henry as the steel-driver would no longer seem possible, although his trail promised a great deal. The wise thing, perhaps, for the investigator was to accept from the first the report of Charles James, that his uncle was not the man; but the existence of the criminal element in the Henry tradition led to the suspicion that the whole story had not been told. The failure of Mr. James to remember a proper amount of detail about the career of his uncle, along with his history in full of the Civil War, added weight in that direction. But this trail, like that followed earlier at Norfolk, leads only to disappointment; and the testimony of Charles James for the steel-driver may be placed among the popular reports of the second chapter of this study, and, after a necessary explanation, that of Jeff Washington may be placed among the direct testimony of the third chapter.

Not a little chagrined at the failure of Jeff Washington to consider the photograph in a more serious manner, I took pains to remind him that John L. Henry seemed to be the only member of the Henry families around Keswick, or in the larger Charlottesville district, who could qualify as the steel-driver, and that he did not have a sister there or elsewhere. Jeff continued his good-natured attitude, and readily shifted ground in two important particulars. Instead of repeating his earlier report of first coming in contact with John Henry at Keswick, a depot on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad about ten miles east of Charlottesville, he stated that he first knew the steel-driver at Ivy, a depot on the same road about ten miles west of Charlottesville. He explained that Henry's sister lived, not in Charlottesville, but "back on the ridge of the mountains above Hinton," West Virginia. While the first shift may have no positive value, the second is highly significant, in that Jeff placed the sister in the immediate section where the steel-driver's white woman lived, according to Miller, Scott, and Gilpin. At the time the tunnel was built this section was not a Negro community, and in all probability not a Negro there. Henry's sister and Henry's white woman, then, are one and the same, and Jeff told more than he meant to. His amusement,

therefore, at my failure to find Henry's sister in Charlottesville seems obvious.

The trails of John Henry have brought unsatisfactory results, and the question of what became of him is still not answered. His leaving the Big Bend neighborhood was certainly not to the tune of a brass band, and it is very doubtful that he left at all. He had about an equal chance to go or stay. The fear of his ghost in the tunnel and the wide popular belief in his death there, where escape at best was only a gambling possibility, may be regarded as lending some value to the ballad record of the event. Fortunately, a full account of the career of John Henry is not necessary for an answer to the question of his existence and the reality of his drilling-contest.



John Raybern Zierold

THE JOHN HENRY HAMMER SONG

A

Mrs. Sidney Wilson, Minnehaha Springs, W. Va. Mrs. Wilson obtained this version from her brother, a man well acquainted with construction camps in the South.

This old hammer, - - huh,
Killed John Henry, - - huh;
This old hammer, - - huh,
Killed John Henry, - - huh;
This old hammer, - - huh,
Killed John Henry, - - huh;
Killed him dead, - - huh.

Ain't no hammer, - - huh,
In these mountains, - - huh;
Ain't no hammer, - - huh,
In these mountains, - - huh;
Ain't no hammer, - - huh,
In these mountains, - - huh;
Rings like mine, - - huh.

Take this hammer, - - huh,
And give it to the walker, - - huh;
Take this hammer, - - huh,
And give it to the walker, - - huh;
Take this hammer, - - huh,
And give it to the walker, - - huh;
For I'm goin' home, - - huh.

I told Hattie, - - huh,
To whip - a those children, - - huh;
I told Hattie, - - huh,
To whip - a those children, - - huh;
I told Hattie, - - huh,
To whip - a those children, - - huh;
Make 'em mind, - - huh.

'Cause the penitentiary, - - huh,
Is full o' people, - - huh;
'Cause the penitentiary, - - huh,
Is full o' people, - - huh;
'Cause the penitentiary, - - huh,
Is full o' people, - - huh;
Won't raised right, - - huh.

I told Hattie, - - huh,
 To make her dress a little longer, - - huh;
 I told Hattie, - - huh,
 To make her dress a little longer, - - huh;
 I told Hattie, - - huh,
 To make her dress a little longer, - - huh;
 A - showin' of her laig, - - huh.

B

Newton Redwine. Mr. Redwine says: "John Henry had no regular song to sing as he worked, but it seems that the following was his favorite just before his death." The Beattyville Enterprise, Beattyville, Ky., Feb. 1, 1929.

I have hammered
 Four long years
 With this old hammer

I have hammered
 On the W & A
 I have hammered
 On the old M & C
 I have worked
 On the C & S

The hammer am a ringin'
 And the steel am a singin'
 I'll put the hole
 On down boys
 Put the hole on down

This old hammer
 Killed John Scott
 It will never kill me

Hammer am a ringin'
 Steel am a singin'
 I'll put the hole
 On down boys
 I'll put the hole
 On down - hut - hut - hut

Hut - hut - hut
 I'll put the hole on down
 I'll put the hole on down

This old hammer
 Has killed John Scott
 It will never kill me
 Hut - hut - hut

I'll put the hole on down, boys
 I'll put the hole on down